

Women and Blood Impurities in Christian Egypt

Menstruation, Childbirth, and Liturgical Participation among Late Antique and Medieval Copts

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Scholars interested in the observance of ritual purity in Christianity often note the evidence of late antique Christian Egypt as an early example of the enduring taboo on blood impurities for menstruants and postpartum women. These physical, uncontrollable, and temporary “impurities,” however, are not as clearly defined as is often presumed or argued. The concept and practice of female blood purification in antiquity and the Middle Ages has a complex and multifaceted history, and relevant medieval sources for Coptic Orthodox Christians remain unaddressed in scholarly discussions. In this article, I examine the concept of ritual purity related to women and those in contact with vaginal blood discharge, tracing its development from religious and cultural practices in pre-Christian Egypt through the late medieval Coptic tradition via a number of previously unincorporated hagiographic, homiletic, canonical, and liturgical sources.¹ Other forms of impurity were known to Egyptian and broader late antique and medieval Christianity, including concerns around seminal emissions and impurity by contagion.² Here, however, I will

concentrate on perceived impurities related to women’s reproductive biology, namely, menstruation and childbirth, and the influence of these on the mother’s and the newborn’s religious practice and liturgical participation. As I will argue, the custom of excluding menstruating women from receiving the Eucharist, or even accessing sacred spaces altogether, can be documented with relative consistency across the extant sources from antiquity through the late Middle Ages. Yet contrary to widespread scholarly narratives, Egyptian Christians did not adopt a simplistic application of Levitical norms around purity, and the prohibition of women from sacred space and receiving Communion for forty or eighty days after giving birth appears to have been unknown among Egyptian Christians of antiquity. Rather, such a custom most likely developed in the Middle Ages, around the same time we witness increased regulations concerning impurity among Eastern Christians, especially those following the Byzantine tradition, though initially for the Copts this development was not without controversy or resistance.

Non-Christian Birth Purity Practices in Ancient Egypt

Early Egyptian Christians were part of Egypt’s religiously diverse society, including communities of “pagans” and Jews, all of whom knew of practices around ritual impurity associated with women and reproductive blood. The early Christian evidence can

1 All original language transcriptions are transcribed from the cited manuscripts, at times with idiomatic modifications, and translations are the author’s unless otherwise specified. Page citations separated by a slash (/) indicate the original text/translation when an edition of the referenced manuscript is available.

2 On these topics in the Christian East and West, see chapter 5 and the associated bibliography in T. Berger, *Gender Differences and the Making of Liturgical History: Lifting a Veil on Liturgy’s Past*, Liturgy, Worship, and Society (London, 2011).

thus only be properly understood by contextualizing these customs alongside the evidence for social anxieties and religious observances of ritual purity among pagans and Jews in Roman Egypt.

Concerns regarding the ritual purity of women are well documented, even as early as ancient Egypt's New Kingdom era (ca. 1292–1077 BCE). Full reintegration into society for ritually impure women typically required a period of relative seclusion, ranging from five to more than forty days, depending on the nature of the impurity, followed by a ritual cleansing.³ During this period, ostraca with hieratic script from southern Egypt's Thebaid region refer to a designated "place for women," associated with menstrual separation, along with evidence of a post-birth purification lasting fourteen days.⁴ These traditions persisted in Hellenistic Egyptian laws and inscriptions, as seen in Ptolemaic-era (305–330 BCE) legal texts that linked reproductive discharge to the hieroglyphic term for "evil" or "abominable."⁵ One of the most prominent public attestations of purification rituals is a Greek epigraphic inscription on a southern Egyptian temple in Ptolemais, which stipulates that women wishing to enter must observe a purification of forty days after a miscarriage, ten days after childbirth, and seven days following menstruation.⁶ These customs were not arbitrary; rather, at least in part, they were grounded in the perceived time necessary for vaginal bleeding to cease or significantly diminish after such an event.

3 For examples on social isolation during blood impurity, consult A. Nifosi, *Becoming a Woman and Mother in Greco-Roman Egypt: Women's Bodies, Society, and Domestic Space*, *Medicine and the Body in Antiquity* (London, 2019), 158–72. On post-menses and postpartum ritual washings, see R. Baza, "Al-taṭaḥhur fī Miṣr al-qadima: Aṣl fikratihi al-muqaddasa," *Studies on the Arab World Monuments* 18 (2016): 107–37, at 113.

4 T. G. Wilfong, "Menstrual Synchrony and the 'Place of Women' in Ancient Egypt (OIM 13512)," in *Gold of Praise: Studies on Ancient Egypt in Honor of Edward F. Wente*, ed. E. Teeter and J. A. Larson, *Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization* 58 (Chicago, 1999), 419–34. On the evidence for postnatal purification, consult J. J. Janssen, "Absence from Work by the Necropolis Workmen of Thebes," *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 8 (1980): 127–52, at 141–43.

5 P. Frandsen, "The Menstrual 'Taboo' in Ancient Egypt," *JNES* 66.2 (2007): 81–106, at 88–89.

6 J. Bingen, "La *lex sacra* SB I 3451 = LSCG.Suppl. 119 (Ptolémaïs, Haute-Égypte)," *Chronique d'Égypte* 68.135–36 (1993): 219–28, at 220–21. A temple devoted to Isis, Sarapis, and Anubis bore comparable inscriptions: Nifosi, *Becoming a Woman*, 163.

Jewish communities that thrive in late antique Egypt had their own purification customs.⁷ Concerns about female ritual purity appear primarily in Leviticus, which specifies that menstruating women are deemed ritually impure during their discharge and for seven days afterward and are only purified after atonement through an offering. Furthermore, a woman's state of impurity extends to anyone or anything that encounters her (Leviticus 15:19–30). New mothers remained in a state of impurity for longer and for a period that depended on the sex of the newborn (Leviticus 12:2–6): an initial seven days, followed by thirty-three purification days if she gave birth to a male child (for a total of forty days) or an initial fourteen days plus an additional sixty-six days for a female child (for a total of eighty days).⁸ Rabbinical law deemed these women contagious, especially in the initial stage (seven or fourteen days), necessitating their separation from the community.⁹ Time, bathing, and an offering at the temple cleansed the parturient, enabling her reintegration into social and religious life. While these biblical regulations are primarily framed with regard to access to the Temple in Jerusalem—a matter most likely of limited concern for Jews geographically distant from it—they were still relevant to Egyptian Jews, as the importance of ritual purity in Judaism not only predates the Temple and its access but also

7 The Jewish community in Egypt, greatly reduced in numbers following the Kito's War of 117 CE, reemerged from the third century with a thriving community in the Middle Ages: A. Papaconstantinou, "Lifting the Cloak of Invisibility: Identifying the Jews of Late Antique Egypt," in *Religious Identifications in Late Antique Papyri, 3rd–12th Century Egypt*, ed. M. Brand and E. Scheerlinck (London, 2023), 69–91; E. Krakowski, *Coming of Age in Medieval Egypt: Female Adolescence, Jewish Law, and Ordinary Culture* (Princeton, 2018), 16–18.

8 Ancient medical and philosophical theories (for instance, those authored by Hippocrates, Aristotle, and Galen) shed light on the rationale as to why a mother bearing a female child has double the purification period of a male: M. Thiessen, "The Legislation of Leviticus 12 in Light of Ancient Embryology," *Vetus Testamentum* 68 (2018): 297–319, at 313–15; L. Dean-Jones, *Women's Bodies in Classical Greek Science* (Oxford, 2001). For an argument on this matter considering Philo, see S. Whitear, "Solving the Gender Problem in Leviticus 12: From Philo to Feminism," *Annali di Storia dell'Esegesi* 37.2 (2020): 299–319.

9 For insights into social isolation and the rabbinical relaxation of impurity concerns following the initial purification period, consult S. Cohen, "Menstruants and the Sacred in Judaism and Christianity," in *Women's History and Ancient History*, ed. S. Pomeroy (Chapel Hill, NC, 1991), 273–99, at 278–87, 293, n. 16.

persisted well after its destruction.¹⁰ Purity concerns were codified in foundational rabbinic texts such as the second-century Mishnah and its supplement, the Tosefta, anchoring such regulations for Jews in the diaspora.¹¹ In short, the milieu in which Christianity emerged in Egypt was marked by various fixed parameters governing menstruating and postpartum women. The cultural context of pagan Egypt presumed ritual purity practices, while the shared Scriptures between the Jewish and Christian communities, along with instances of Jewish conversion to Christianity, very likely facilitated the exchange of ritual purity traditions between the two Abrahamic faiths.¹² Nevertheless, in their engagement with such customs, early Christians in Egypt forged their own approaches.

Egypt as the Source of a Christian Leviticalization?

Scholarship on vaginal blood impurity has often looked to early Egypt as a harbinger of later Christian practices that distanced women from liturgical participation. For instance, in her article on Byzantine notions of ritual impurity, Vassa Larin contrasts Alexandrian evidence with early Syrian perspectives on blood impurity and argues that Egyptian Christian literature strictly upheld a separation between women deemed impure through vaginal bleeding and their eucharistic participation.

10 On the enduring concerns around ritual purity disassociated with the Temple, consult T. Kazen, "Purity as Popular Practice: Erasing the Anachronistic Divide between Household and Cult," in *Purity in Ancient Judaism: Texts, Contexts, and Concepts*, ed. L. Doering, J. Frey, and L. von Bartenwerffer, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 528 (Tübingen, 2025), 193–220. Y. Adler, "Ritual Purity in Daily Life after 70 CE: The Chalk Vessel Assemblage from Shu'afat as a Test Case," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 52 (2021): 39–62, and E. Krakowski, "Maimonides' Menstrual Reform in Egypt," *JQR* 110.2 (2020): 245–89.

11 Consult the sixth part of these texts and the relevant discussion in T. Hieke, "Menstruation and Impurity," in *Religion and Female Body in Ancient Judaism and Its Environments*, ed. G. Xeravits, Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Studies 28 (Berlin, 2015), 54–70, at 64–67.

12 Scholars have challenged the idea that Christian views on ritual purity were primarily shaped by Judaism. See the rest of my arguments and C. Fonrobert, "The Didascalia Apostolorum: A Mishnah for the Disciples of Jesus," *JChSt* 9.4 (2001): 483–509, at 489, eadem, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Genders* (Stanford, 2000), 197–98. For a counterargument, see Cohen, "Menstruants and the Sacred," 287–90.

Larin argues that unlike Alexandria, "the situation was different in the Syrian capital of Antioch, where a strong Jewish presence posed a tangible threat to Christian identity."¹³ Similarly, in her 2011 monograph on gender in liturgical history, Teresa Berger highlights the relative leniency in Syria compared to Alexandria on matters of blood impurity, since Syrians were "confronted with a group within the church 'converted from the [Jewish] people' who not only continue to honor the Sabbath but also observe ritual purity laws."¹⁴ According to such narratives, early Egyptian Christianity showed greater acceptance of ritual impurity than the early Syrian church.

Such proposals present several problems. First, like Syria, Egypt in antiquity was a landscape shared with pagans and a sizable Jewish population, and therefore would presumably have encountered identity threats similar to those in Syria. Second, and most important, the conclusions of Larin and Berger (among others) are based on a selected Syrian source, considering it the norm while overlooking competing literature. The Egyptian Christian response was not to abolish notions of ritual impurity, but neither was it to implement Levitical or rabbinic customs. Furthermore, a broader investigation of late antique evidence reveals that Egyptian and Syrian Christians largely shared a common tradition regarding impurities associated with vaginal blood.

The earliest evidence concerning ritual impurity in Christian Egypt appears in Origen's *Homilies on Leviticus*, preached in Alexandria between 238 and 244 CE, shortly before his disciple Dionysius

13 V. Larin, "What Is Ritual Im/Purity and Why," *SVThQ* 52.3 (2008): 275–92, at 282, and *passim*.

14 Partially quoting the *Didascalia Apostolorum*: Berger, *Gender Differences*, 104, and *passim*. Similar assertions could be inferred from N. Glibetić, "Orthodox Liturgical Rites at Pregnancy Loss: Ritual Responses to Miscarriage, Stillbirth, and Abortion in Late Byzantium," *Journal of Orthodox Christian Studies* 4.2 (2022): 151–79, at 174; D. Rizk, "'Churching of Women' and Baptism [at] 40/80 Days" and "Women and Communion," *Learn.Pray.Love*, respectively, <https://tinyurl.com/4d693x33> and <https://tinyurl.com/bdzhr25d>. See also the following, though the author recognizes some West Syrian pushback: B. Caseau, "*Sancta sanctis*: Normes et gestes de la communion entre Antiquité et haut Moyen Âge," in *Pratiques de l'eucharistie dans les Églises d'Orient et d'Occident (Antiquité et Moyen Âge): Actes du séminaire tenu à Paris, Institut catholique (1997–2004)*, 2 vols., *L'institution*, ed. N. Bériou, B. Caseau, and D. Rigaux, Collection des Études Augustiniennes / Série Moyen Âge et Temps Modernes 45 (Paris, 2009), 1:371–420, at 391–405.

(r. 248–264) assumed the patriarchate.¹⁵ Although Origen does not directly address Leviticus 15 on menstrual purity in these homilies, a brief mention in *On Leviticus* 8 and fragments of his *Homilies on 1 Corinthians* suggest that he considers menstruating women impure for seven days.¹⁶ In *On Leviticus* 8, Origen discusses birth impurity, citing Levitical passages that govern a woman's purification after childbirth.¹⁷ He even extends concerns about defilement to include newborns, despite Leviticus's not explicitly mandating their purification.¹⁸ Origen affirms that he regards a parturient as impure, specifying that she remains in a state of "unclean blood" for seven or fourteen days, depending on the sex of the newborn, which, according to Leviticus, carried the strongest connotations of "dangers" associated with impurity.¹⁹ Thus Origen here seems to follow an attentive reading of Leviticus, though differing in that he regards the secondary or remaining Levitical postpartum period (thirty-three days for a male child and sixty-six for a female) as involving "clean blood."²⁰ We must

be careful, however, not to conflate Origen's citations of Levitical birth impurity—an expectation in a homily on Leviticus 12—with liturgical prescription for his audience. Origen neither prescribes nor describes here any practice for Christian women regarding either the days of impure or the subsequent period of pure bleeding. He simply states that on the eighth day "she who bears a male child becomes clean," and "*beginning in the third week is cleansed* from the uncleanness that was contracted by being born female."²¹ Thereby, Origen seemingly limits postpartum purification to the initial days of bleeding and thus to a maximum of fourteen days.

Elsewhere, however, in *On Leviticus* 12, Origen poses a question to his audience: "Or do you not know that when a male child is forty days old, he is offered at the altar that he may be purified there . . . ?"²² Origen thus apparently attests to a type of "churching" ritual, the formal readmission of the neophyte and the postpartum mother into liturgical participation, at least for newborns, a practice already familiar to some in his time. But he does not clarify whether, or to what extent, this ritual implied that Christian *mothers* were considered impure for the entire period, and thus required to abstain from liturgical participation until presenting their child for purification. Determining Origen's precise views on whether and how Levitical regulations should apply to contemporary liturgical practice for Christian women is challenging, given his complex view of the entire Levitical purity system. On the one hand he seems to affirm certain, limited Levitical concepts of birth impurity, while on the other hand he also interprets Levitical notions of protecting the sacred from the impure in light of a theology of the baptized Christian's ability to adhere to the high priesthood of Christ.²³ While Origen leaves many questions unanswered

15 On Dionysius's and Origen's relationship, consult Eusebius of Caesarea, *Historia ecclesiastica* 6.29–41 (K. Lake, ed., *Eusebius: The Ecclesiastical History*, 2 vols. [London, 1926], 2:81–111).

16 SC 287; Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus* 8.3.6 (G. Barkley, trans., *Origen: Homilies on Leviticus 1–16*, The Fathers of the Church 83 [Washington, DC, 1990], 158); Origen, *Cat. in Ep. ad Cor.* 34.12.4 (C. Jenkins, ed., "Origen on 1 Corinthians," *JTS* 9 [1908]: 500–14, at 502). Consult the discussion in A. Weckwerth, *Casta placet superis: Konzeptionen kultischer Reinheit in der Spätantike*, Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum, Ergänzungsbände 42 (Münster, Germany, 2022), 281–86; M. Blidstein, *Purity, Community, and Ritual in Early Christian Literature*, Oxford Studies in the Abrahamic Religions (Oxford, 2017), 215–27.

17 Origen, *On Leviticus* 8.2.2–8.4.3 (Barkley, *Origen*, 153–60).

18 Arguments for the "contagious" nature of vaginal blood are articulated in Leviticus 12 and implied in chapter 15, with corresponding assertions in the New Testament reinforcing established notions of impurity through contact: M. Thiessen, "Luke 2:22, Leviticus 12, and Parturient Impurity," *NT* 54.1 (2012): 16–29. Furthermore, consult discussion and see above, n. 9.

19 On the perceived menstrual and lochial dangers and odor pollution, see Blidstein, *Purity, Community, and Ritual*, 25, 188–201; S. Cole, *Landscapes, Gender, and Ritual Space: The Ancient Greek Experience* (Berkeley, 2004), 108–11. Similarly, on the arguments of hygiene, consult M. Kapsalis, "The Canons of Ritual Uncleanness and Women in the Orthodox Church," *Coptic Church Review* 19.4 (1998): 110–21.

20 Origen, *On Leviticus* 8.3.6 (Barkley, *Origen*, 158). Origen contrasts with the Septuagint and Sahidic redactions of Leviticus 12, which regard the latter purification days as being in unclean blood. See the oldest and most comprehensive Sahidic witness to Leviticus in manuscript New York, Pierpont Morgan Library (= MLM),

MS M.566 (ninth century), fol. 171^b; manuscript 1 in L. Depuydt, *Catalogue of Coptic Manuscripts in the Pierpont Morgan Library*, vol. 1, Oriental Series 1, Corpus of Illuminated Manuscripts 4 (Leuven, 1993), 5–7. For an edition and translation, see A. St. Demiana, *Sahidic Coptic Leviticus: Its Manuscript Witnesses and Its Text*, Texts and Studies in Eastern Christianity 30 (Leiden, 2025), 210–11.

21 Origen, *On Leviticus* 8.4.1 (Barkley, *Origen*, 159).

22 Origen, *On Leviticus* 12.4.1 (Barkley, *Origen*, 223–24).

23 Origen seemingly subverts the very foundation of the sacred versus profane distinction by asserting that Christians can always dwell in the "sanctuary"—provided they imitate Christ and remain in the word of God: Origen, *On Leviticus* 12.4.4–5 (Barkley, *Origen*, 225–26, and *passim*).

regarding the extent to which vaginal bleeding could or should affect Christian women's liturgical participation, later Christian writers from Egypt provide further context on the practical application of these beliefs.

In his third-century letter to Bishop Basilides of the churches in Pentapolis, Dionysius, the Alexandrian pagan-turned-patriarch, found the idea of menstruating women partaking in the Eucharist surprising, since in his experience they were separated from society.²⁴ Thus, for Dionysius, menstruating women should not approach the holy table or touch the body and blood of Christ until pure (καθαρός), seemingly referring to the cessation of blood flow, since the text refers only to menstruants and makes no appeal to the Levitical schedule for counting seven days *after* menstruation. Similarly, Timothy I (r. 381–384 CE), who would later succeed Dionysius as patriarch of Alexandria, advised in a series of responses to pastoral inquiries that a menstruating woman should refrain from participating in the Eucharist “until she is purified” (ἕως ἂν καθαρῇ), thus also alluding to the cessation of blood discharge, though not all translations of the text preserve Timothy's directive.²⁵ Dionysius's and Timothy's silence on birth purification is noteworthy because they both discuss issues related to female vaginal bleeding, namely the need to keep menstruants away from the Eucharist and the church until ritually prepared.²⁶

24 περὶ δὲ τῶν ἐν ἀφ᾽ ἑδρῶ γυναικῶν could be read as “concerning women in their menstrual separation”: PG 10:1281; Dionysius of Alexandria, *Ep. ad Basilidem*, 2 (P. Joannou, ed. and trans., *Discipline générale antique [IV–IX s.]*: *Les canons des pères grecs*, vol. 2 [Grottaferrata, 1963], 12). Dionysius was raised a pagan and was thus knowledgeable about post-birth customs of his era: R. Basset, ed., *Le Synaxaire arabe jacobite (rédação copte) IV: Les mois de Barmahat, Barmoudah et Bachons*, PO 16.2 (Paris, 1922), 224–28.

25 Canon 7 in PG 33:1300 (Joannou, *Discipline générale antique*, 2:244). The Ethiopic canons of Timothy make no mention of barring menstruating women from receiving Communion: A. Bausi, “La versione etiopica delle Risposte canoniche di Timoteo I attribuite a Pietro di Alessandria (CPG II, nr. 2520),” *Scrinium* 2.1 (2006): 41–57, at 50–51. Nonetheless, in the medieval Ethiopic heritage, menstruating women typically refrained from entering the church out of regard for the Eucharist: M. Herman, “Towards a History of Women in Medieval Ethiopia,” in *A Companion to Medieval Ethiopia and Eritrea*, ed. S. Kelly (Leiden, 2020), 365–94, at 379–80.

26 In addition to other possible influences discussed, Neoplatonism, where one transcends impurities of the physical realm to return to a state of unity with the divine, would also have influenced early Alexandrian thinkers such as Philo, Origen, Dionysius, and Timothy: Weckwerth, *Casta placent superis*, 51–56, 256–62. Similarly, on the

They therefore display an interest in the topic of female blood impurity, but do not elaborate on the extent to which such impurity applies to parturition. The two Alexandrian patriarchs' canonical responses became the backbone of later ecclesiastical legislation on the topic, within and outside Alexandrian circles.²⁷ Lastly, Cyril of Alexandria (r. 412–444 CE), in his exegesis on Leviticus and Numbers, unlike Origen, ignores the chapters on impurity associated with reproductive fluids, and prioritizes instead other Levitical forms of pollution such as death and leprosy.²⁸

Early Egyptian Christian literature thus upholds the practice of distancing menstruating women from sacred spaces and eucharistic participation while seeming to imply that this distance concerns the period of bleeding. Yet rather than being an Egyptian peculiarity, these customs align with early Syrian evidence, contrary to scholarly arguments. It is true that one influential source that circulated throughout the Eastern Mediterranean but originated in Syria, the third-century *Didascalia Apostolorum* (DA), argues against notions of women's impurity. The author of this source encourages menstruating women to enter sacred spaces and partake of the Eucharist, in contrast to the directives of early Egyptian sources, all the while implying that similar

influence of Christian ritual purity regulations stemming from Near East philosophies, consult T. Philip, *Menstruation and Childbirth in the Bible*, Studies in Biblical Literature 88 (New York, 2006), 43–121. See also n. 8 above.

27 Alexandrian canons on ritual purity continued to be copied elsewhere, such as Canon 17 in *The Rudder*, an authoritative eighteenth-century nomocanon source written by Nicodemus the Athonite (d. 1809), who bases its context regarding menstrual impurity on the teachings of these two early Alexandrian patriarchs: R. Masterjohn, ed., *The Rudder (Pedalion) of the Metaphorical Ship of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church of Orthodox Christians* (West Brookfield, MA, 2005), 1687.

28 PG 69:539/89/642; CPG 3, 5201 (N. Lunn, trans., *Glaphyra on the Pentateuch*, vol. 2, *Exodus through Deuteronomy*, The Fathers of the Church 138 [Washington, DC, 2018], 138–60, 196–205, and passim). Similarly, although other short lacunae occur, Leviticus 15 is the only entire chapter missing from MLM, MS M.566, fols. 171^b, 21v–22r. Considering that the codex was produced at the monastic scriptorium of the Monastery of the Archangel Michael at al-Ḥamūlī in Fayyūm (ca. 100 km south of Cairo), the manuscript's editor and translator, Antonia St. Demiana, suggests that the content regarding menstrual impurity was deemed irrelevant to the male community and probably omitted during transcription. The scribe nevertheless retained the postpartum literature of Leviticus 12: St. Demiana, *Sabidic Coptic Leviticus*, 210–11, 229–30, and the discussion at 401.

practices were observed by women in both regions.²⁹ But even this clerical directive for menstruating women to participate does not appear to have gained broader acceptance among West Syrian authors. In fact, this statement in the *DA* stands as a relative outlier when compared to slightly later, often-overlooked texts on this subject from the same region. Numerous West Syrian authors resisted this leniency, aligning with the prevailing cultural and religious norms of barring menstruating women from church, just as we find at Alexandria and more broadly in Egypt. Notable figures such as John of Tella (483–538 CE), Severus of Antioch (465–538 CE), and Jacob of Edessa (640–708 CE) all maintained menstrual separation out of eucharistic reverence, thus calling into question the supposed regional divide between Christians of Egypt and Syria on this question.³⁰ It is only much later, in the eleventh century, that evidence suggests East Syrians embraced the more permissive stance of the *DA*.³¹

If Egyptian authors—like many Christians elsewhere—perceived the need to uphold the separation of women experiencing impurity from sacramental

participation, it should be underscored that such restrictions endorsed by Egyptian authors differ from those prescribed in Leviticus 15 and observed by Egyptian Jews. All extant texts imply that menstruating Christian women were considered purified once their bleeding had ceased, without the additional seven-day waiting period required of Jewish women according to Leviticus 15 and Rabbinic texts. Interpreting the limited evidence on late antique postpartum women is challenging, but save for Origen's allusion to some Levitical concepts, no early Egyptian author implies any need for postpartum women to adhere to a sex-specific schedule of days regarding their return to church and resuming Communion reception. Similarly, early Egyptian liturgical sources on baptism make no mention of purificatory rites or the churching of women after a specific postpartum period, suggesting that such rituals most likely developed only later, as was the case in Byzantium.³²

One could argue that these authors disregarded postpartum purification because such women were less likely to attend church during recovery, unlike menstruating women, who were considered more of a "risk" by "stealthily" coming to church and receiving the sacrament. Yet the consistent omission of post-birth purity standards, despite the long-standing presence of comparable Jewish and pagan norms in Egypt, could reflect a deliberate choice by Egyptian Christians to distinguish themselves on this matter. Just as menstrual

29 *Didascalia Apostolorum* 26.1; A. Vööbus, trans., *The Didascalia Apostolorum in Syriac: Chapters XI–XXVI*, CSCO 407–8, Scriptores Syri 179–180 (Leuven, 1979), 256/239. The late fourth-century *Apostolic Constitutions* (*AC*) 6.27.3, 7, a reworking of the *DA* that also originated in the Syro-Antiochene milieu, reaffirms that Christian women should not observe ritual separation due to reproductive discharge, whether from menstruation, childbirth, or even miscarriage. This resistance suggests that fourth-century Syrians had been introduced to a purification practice for new mothers by that time, with this author strongly opposing the custom. In Egypt, by the mid-eleventh century, the first six books of the *AC* had been widely disseminated, though these bore little resemblance to the third-century *DA*: W. S. Qilāda, ed., *Kitāb al-dusqūliyya ta'lim al-rusul* (Cairo, 1979), and A. Stewart, "The Arabic Didascalia," <https://tinyurl.com/5n7bzmr3>.

30 A. Vööbus, trans., *The Synodicon in the West Syrian Tradition*, CSCO 368, Scriptores Syri 162 (Leuven, 1976), John: 218/202; Severus: 144/141; Jacob: 262/239.

31 The eleventh-century East Syrian author Ibn al-Ṭayyib teaches that menstrual blood does not restrict access to the Eucharist, as the purity conferred by baptism takes precedence, similar to the directive in the *DA*: W. Hoenerbach and O. Spies, eds., *Ibn al-Ṭayyib Fiqh An-Naṣrāniyya. "Das Recht Der Christenheit" I. Teil*, CSCO 161–162, 167–168, Scriptores Arabici 16–19 (Leuven, 1956), 97, 100. Similarly in the Christian West, in the early seventh century, Gregory the Great (d. 604 CE) commended the prevailing custom of menstruating women's refraining from the Eucharist out of reverence, though he did not mandate their absence: R. Meens, "Ritual Purity and the Influence of Gregory the Great in the Early Middle Ages," *Studies in Church History* 32 (1996): 31–43.

32 See, for instance, the baptismal rites described in Canon 19 of the so-called *Canons of Hippolytus* and the fourth-century euchologion widely ascribed to Bishop Sarapion of Thmuis (d. ca. 360): R. G. Coquin, ed., *Les Canons d'Hippolyte: Édition critique de la version arabe*, PO 31.2 (Paris, 1966), 375–87; Sarapion's euchologion is extant in the Greek manuscript Mt. Athos, Monastery of the Great Lavra, B 29 (Eustr. 149), estimated to date to the twelfth century. See CPG 2495 and M. E. Johnson, *The Prayers of Sarapion of Thmuis: A Literary, Liturgical, and Theological Analysis*, OCA 249 (Rome, 1995), 55–59 (text) and 89–92, 124–47 (analysis). On early Egyptian Christian baptism rituals and those shared with the Ethiopic tradition, all of which lack any evidence for purification rituals or prayers, see H. Brakmann, "ΒΑΠΤΙΣΜΑ ΑΙΝΕΣΕΩΣ: Ordines und Orationen kirchlicher Eingliederung in Alexandrien und Ägypten," in *Neugeborene aus Wasser und Heiligem Geist: Kölner Kolloquium zur Initiatio Christiana*, ed. H. Brakmann, T. Chronz, and C. Sode, *Jerusalem Theologisches Forum* 37 (Munich, 2020), 85–195, at 85–104, 109–14, and passim. Similarly, see also G. Kretschmar, "Beiträge zur Geschichte der Liturgie, insbesondere der Tauf liturgie, in Ägypten," *Jahrbuch für Liturgik und Hymnologie* 8 (1963): 1–54, and A. Baumstark, "Eine ägyptische Mess- und Tauf liturgie vermutlich des 6. Jahrhunderts," *OC* 1 (1901): 1–45, at 33–45.

separation appears to have been encouraged only insofar as blood was actually present (in contrast to Jewish practice), so too early Christians in Egypt may have held that postpartum impurity likewise ceased with the cessation of bleeding, as implied by Origen and evident in some medieval witnesses (see below). Whether intentional or not, this omission aligns with the wider late antique Christian narrative, suggesting that early Christians in Egypt were less invested in statutory postpartum purity schedules than some within their surrounding society. This observation should prompt caution in adopting the prevailing scholarly view that Christians in Egypt merely upheld an uncritical application of Levitical purity norms.

With this in mind, we can turn to examining one of the more complex texts that scholars have linked to ritual purity in late antique Egypt. The so-called *Canons of Hippolytus* (*CH*) represents a collection of canons developed in part from the third-century church order known as the *Apostolic Tradition* (*AT*), but the *CH* is only extant in a twelfth-century Arabic recension. Canon 18 (CHAr18) of this Arabic collection outlines a postpartum purification based on the sex of the child, closely resembling Levitical traditions, though extending to midwives. Most scholars view the *CH* as Egyptian in origin, derived from a now-lost Greek urtext, transmitted first through a Sahidic Coptic medium in the early fourth century and later through a Bohairic Coptic redaction.³³ But without these intermediary texts to verify the Arabic version's fidelity to the original, caution is essential before asserting that the expansions to the *AT* that are present in CHAr18 represent fourth-century regulations.

Scholars have mistakenly classified the entire corpus of the Arabic *CH* as a work of antiquity. Paul F. Bradshaw, in his introduction to the *CH*, as well as

Alistair Stewart position the final redaction of the *CH* as a fourth-century text, even though both scholars recognize the additions to the Arabic redaction in relation to the *AT*.³⁴ Other scholars, such as Berger, Larin, Andreas Weckwerth, and Hubert Kaufhold, typically with some reliance on the above scholarship, support ascribing it to antiquity.³⁵ Even the most recent literature, coauthored by Nathan P. Chase and Maxwell E. Johnson, while acknowledging expansions in the *CH* compared to other similar texts, still argues for a mid-fourth-century date behind the twelfth-century Arabic text.³⁶ These scholarly discussions largely ignore the risk of misattributing potential Arabic accretions to late antiquity and thus create a misleading perception of their regulation, despite René-Georges Coquin's earlier proposition suggesting a twelfth-century origin for the Arabic redaction or Athanasius al-Maqrī's similar affirmation.³⁷ While the Arabic edition may incorporate numerous elements from circa third-century sources, it remains difficult to prove that this version did not undergo significant alterations over the centuries. Indeed, evidence suggests that the very text of CHAr18, which has formed the basis for scholarly arguments regarding the supposed postpartum purification practice of Christians in late antique Egypt, may indeed not form a part of the original urtext.

In the absence of original sources, one potential avenue for understanding textual transmission lies in the comparative method. An analysis of CHAr18 reveals that the Arabic recension diverges significantly from the *AT*, its closest surviving ancestor, which makes

33 Consult the synopsis on the text's transmission in Á. Mihálykó, *The Christian Liturgical Papyri: An Introduction*, Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 114 (Heidelberg, 2019), 41–43. Coquin defends the text's Alexandrian origins, while Brakmann asserts northern Egyptian origins: Coquin, *Canons d'Hippolyte*, 318–32; H. Brakmann, "Alexandria und die Kanones des Hippolyt," *JbAC* 22 (1979): 139–49. Stewart's counterargument, though an outlier, situates the canon's origins as Cappadocian or Antiochene, in *The Canons of Hippolytus: An English Version, with Introduction and Annotation and Accompanying Arabic Text*, Early Christian Studies 22 (Sydney, 2021), 30–44, which was critically rebutted in N. P. Chase and M. E. Johnson, *The Origins of the Canons of Hippolytus* (Collegeville, MN, 2024).

34 P. F. Bradshaw, ed., and C. Bebaui, trans., *The Canons of Hippolytus* (Bramcote, 1987), 5–10; P. F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy* (Oxford, 2002), 83–4; Stewart, *Canons of Hippolytus*, 1–32. The *AT* circulated in Egypt under the name the "Egyptian Church Order," a work also attributed to Hippolytus. On the interrelation of these documents and its use in formulating the *CH*, see A. al-Maqrī, *Qawānin Hibūlīṭīs al-qibṭiyya* (Cairo, 2004), 14.

35 Berger, *Gender Differences*, 123; Larin, "Ritual Im/Purity," 287; Weckwerth, *Casta placent superis*, 259; H. Kaufhold, "Sources of Canon Law in the Eastern Churches," in *The History of Byzantine and Eastern Canon Law to 1500*, ed. W. Hartmann and K. Pennington (Washington, DC, 2012), 215–342, at 269.

36 The authors offer limited fresh perspectives on CHAr18, largely reiterating what is already established: Chase and Johnson, *The Origins of the Canons of Hippolytus*, xix–xxiii, 41–42, and 113.

37 Coquin, *Canons d'Hippolyte*, 299–301; A. al-Maqrī, *Ma'mūdiyyat al-mā' wa-l-rūḥ* (Cairo, 2009), 185–210.

Table 1. Comparison of *AT* 18 and *CHAr*18

<i>AT</i> 18 (Third century)		<i>CHAr</i> 18 (Twelfth century)	
ετβε τεινωληλ ηνετσωτμ επωαχε ¹	<i>Regarding the prayer for those who hear the word.</i>	<i>Concerning midwives, the separation of women from men during prayer, that virgins are to cover their heads, and concerning women who give birth.</i>	القانون الثامن عشر لأجل القوابل وانعزال النساء عن الرجال في الصلاة والعذارى يغطين رؤوسهن ولأجل النساء اللاتي يلدن ²
ζοταν ερωανπρεϥ† σβω λο εφκαθηγει ηαρεηκατηχογμενος ωληη ζαριζαροου εγπορχ. εβολ ηηπιστος	When the teacher stops teaching, the catechumens are to pray apart, separated from the faithful.	After the teacher has finished instructing each day, [the catechumens] are to pray separately from the Christians.	ومن بعد ما يفرغ المعلم مما يعلم كل يوم فليصلوا وهم متفرقون من النصارى
		Women who are midwives are not to receive the mysteries, ³ until after they have been purified. Their purification shall be thus: if the child she delivered is male, twenty days; if it were female, forty days. Midwives are not to neglect the confinement, but they are to pray to God for she who has delivered [a child]. If she goes to the house of God before being purified, she should pray with the catechumens who have not yet been received and are unworthy to mix [with the faithful].	والنساء القوابل لا يتناولن من السرائر إلا بعد أن يتطهرن أولاً وطهارتهن تكون من هذا فإن كان المولود الذي قبلته ذكراً فعشرين يوماً وإن كانت أنثى فأربعين يوماً ولا يدعن النفاساء بل يصلين الله على التي قبلت وإذا مضت إلى بيت الله من قبل أن تتطهر فلتصل مع المتعظين الذين لم يقبلوا بعد ولا استحقوا الخلطة
αγω ηαρενηριومه αρερατοϥ εϥωληη ρη ογμα ρη τεκκλησια ζαριζαροου ηηηη ηημοϥ ετε νηριومه ηπιστος ετε νηριومه ηκατηχογμενος εϥωανοϥω δε εϥωληη ηπερτρεϥ† ειρηνη ηπατετεϥπει γαρ ωπιε εσογααβ ηαρεηπιστος δε αспазе ηνεϥερηϥ ηαγααϥ ηροϥτ ηη ηροϥτ αγω νηριومه ηη νηριومه ηπερτρεροϥτ δε αспазе ηςριμε	Let women stand in one place in the church completely by themselves, both the female faithful and the female catechumens. When they have finished praying, [the catechumens] should not give the [kiss of] peace since their kiss is not yet pure. The faithful should only kiss one another; men among themselves and women among themselves. No man should kiss a woman.	Women are to be separated in a place and are not to give the kiss to any man. The teacher is to lay [his hand] on the catechumens before dismissing them.	والنساء يكن منعزلات في موضع لا يقبلن ذكراً جملة ويضع المعلم يده على المتعظين قبل أن يصرفهم

1 The Sahidic text of the *AT* is listed under “Ecclesiastical Canons” in the manuscript London, British Library, Or. 1320 (1006 CE), fols. 23r–34r; manuscript 162 in W. E. Crum, *Catalogue of the Coptic Manuscripts in the British Museum* (London, 1905), 52–53. The transcription is slightly modified from W. Till and J. Leipoldt, eds., *Der koptische Text der Kirchenordnung Hippolyts*, Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Altchristlichen Literatur 58 (Berlin, 1954), 12, 14.

2 The Arabic text is emended from the critical edition in Coquin, *Canons d’Hippolyte*, 372, 374.

3 Here, as in the other texts examined, we will use “oblation,” “mysteries,” “gifts,” or “body and blood,” all of which are considered synonymous with the Eucharist.

AT 18 (Third century)		CHAR18 (Twelfth century)	
ϸϵιμε δε νιη ηαροϿρεβϸ ϸωοϿ Ͽ̅ οϿπαλλιν αλλα Ͽεν ειλαοϸ ν̅ειδαϿ μαγαααϿ [αν] νοϿκαλϿηα γαρ αν πε παι.	All women should cover their heads with a pallium, but not with a piece of linen alone, for that is not a veil.	Virgin women who have reached maturity are to cover their heads, like adult women, with a pallium, not with a thin cloth. ⁴	والعذارى النساء إذا كملت درجة شبابهن فليغطين رؤوسهن مثل النساء الكبائر ببلايينهن ليس بثوب خفيف
		The woman who has given birth remains outside the holy place [for] forty days if the child she has borne is male, and [for] eighty days if [the infant] is female. If she [the mother] enters the church, she is to pray with the catechumens.	الامراة التي تلد فلتقم خارجا عن الموضع المقدس أربعين يوما إن كان الولد الذي ولدته ذكرا وإن كانت أنثى فثمانين يوما وإذا دخلت الكنيسة تصلي مع المتعطين
		Midwives are to be numerous so that they may not be segregated ⁵ [from worship] all their lives.	والقوابل فليكن كثيرات لنلا يكن خارجا كل حياتهن

4 The author's plea on proper head coverings is most likely a reference to 1 Corinthians 11:13–16, which addresses women covering their heads during prayer. The focus on virgin women relates to wider social practices among late antique Christian women, as discussed by G. Radle, "The Veiling of Women in Byzantium: Liturgy, Hair, and Identity in a Medieval Rite of Passage," *Speculum* 94.4 (2019): 1070–1115.

5 Literally "remain outside" or "excluded."

no mention of the purification of postpartum women or those in contact with them. In Table 1, I compare the relevant canon from the *AT*, known from an eleventh-century Sahidic text, with the twelfth-century CHAR18, which is repeatedly (and mistakenly, I would argue) treated as a genuine, extant fourth-century canon. This comparison, along with other evidence, demonstrates that the late antique base text most likely did not address postpartum ritual defilement, consistent with most Egyptian Christian sources of antiquity.

The medieval recension of CHAR18 introduces new parameters for women and blood impurities not found in the earlier *AT*. The regulation primarily associates midwives with anxieties about ritual purity, as can be noted not only from CHAR18's title, "On midwives . . .," but also from the fact that the content of the mother's postnatal purification is interjected between the regulations on doulas.³⁸ The author of the developed regulation does not strictly adhere to

a Levitical paradigm for post-birth purification, since it is expanded to midwives and does not distinguish between initial and secondary purifications. What is most striking about the text is that it advocates a total number of postpartum days for women that depends on the sex of the newborn, precisely following the overall schedule of Leviticus. This contrasts with the evidence of late antique Egyptian authors as well as the logic of late antique menstruation regulations that were tied to blood flow, and not the Levitical concept of calendar-specific purification schedules.

Women in a state of vaginal discharge retained limited agency. If a new mother or a midwife attended church while ritually unprepared, she was relegated to "pray with the catechumens," who were "unworthy to mix." One might still be inclined to interpret the reference to catechumens as an indication that this regulation originated in late antiquity, given that Egypt abandoned the adult catechumenate by roughly the sixth century.³⁹ Yet even here, there are reasons to be

38 I am unaware of a purification or absolution prayer for midwives to reenter the church in the Coptic rite. For parallels in the Byzantine tradition, see J. Goar, *Ευχολόγιον sive Rituale Graecorum complectens ritus et ordines Divinae Liturgiae, officiorum, sacramentorum, consecrationum, benedictionum, funerum, orationum, &c. cuilibet personae, statui vel temporis congruos, juxta usum Orientalis Ecclesiae*, 2nd ed. (Graz,

1960), 63–64, and the evidence in Glibetić, "Rites at Pregnancy Loss," 169, 176, and *passim*.

39 M. Dujarier, *A History of the Catechumenate: The First Six Centuries* (New York, 1979), 93–100.

cautious. The third-century text carried over from the *AT* specifically addresses catechumens, making its continuation in *CHAR18* stylistically and thematically consistent with the broader canon, irrespective of its date of composition. Furthermore, plausible reasons exist for why a redactor might expand a canon on catechumens even after the decline of the adult catechumenate. Situating such a regulation within an ancient canonical framework of the catechumenate would lend authority, especially in a context in which such a Levitical schedule was controversial, as was the case in early medieval Egypt, as I will demonstrate below. Furthermore, regulations on the spaces of the catechumens would continue to apply to medieval Coptic liturgy and architecture, specifically as the space typically reserved for women. As Robert F. Taft has shown about Byzantine sacred space, the *catechumena* was an area for women during services, unassociated with those preparing for baptism, and the designation of alternate spaces for noncommunicants carried over into medieval Constantinople.⁴⁰ Similarly, in medieval Coptic church architecture, the second-level gallery came to be known as the “house of women” (بيت النساء) and was reserved for females during all services.⁴¹ Later documents discussed below mention administering churching rites in this space.

40 See Taft’s accepted argument for the term *catechumena* as a reference to women’s gallery seating in Byzantium: R. Taft, “Women at Church in Byzantium: Where, When, and Why?,” *DOP* 52 (1998): 27–87, at 31. The twelfth-century Byzantine canonist Theodore Balsamon explains that in Constantinople, the narthex served as a designated area for ritually unprepared women, allowing them to attend church without entering sacred space or receiving the Eucharist: P. Viscuso, “Theodore Balsamon’s Canonical Images of Women,” *GRBS* 45.3 (2005): 317–26, at 321–22. Within Egypt, refer to Canon 25 of the fifth- to sixth-century canons attributed to Athanasius, which assigns irreverent individuals to the “catechumens”: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ar. 251 (1353 CE) (= PAr251), fol. 105r–v; G. Troupeau, *Catalogue des manuscrits arabes, première partie: manuscrits chrétiens*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1972), 208–9. For an edition, see W. Riedel and W. Crum, eds., *The Canons of Athanasius of Alexandria: The Arabic and Coptic Versions* (Oxford, 1904), 33–34/30.

41 An example is the tenth-century patriarchal church of St. Mary in Ḥārat Zuwayla near central Cairo, which, according to Coquin, served as the patriarchal residence and cathedral during the time of Pope Gabriel V (1409–1427). His fifteenth-century *diataxis* describes customs associated with the “house of women,” attesting to its continued use: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ar. 98 (seventeenth century) (= PAr98), fols. 71v–72r; Troupeau, *Catalogue des manuscrits arabes*, 75–76. For an edition, consult A. ‘Abdallah, *L’ordinamento liturgico di Gabriele V°, 88° Patriarca Copto (1409–1427)*, *Studia Orientalia Christiana, Aegyptiaca* (Cairo, 1962), 198/381–82. On this architectural

With such significant textual deviations between the *AT* and the *CH*, and such a late dating of our earliest extant version of the *CH*, can one still reconcile the expansions in *CHAR18* with a fourth-century date? To affirm the early dating, Bradshaw hypothesizes that any textual interpolations in the received recension of the *CH* not found in the *AT* most likely originated in the now-lost late antique Greek urtext. He suggests that the Arabic translation belongs to a fourth-century context, as it serves as a direct descendant of the lost original.⁴² Yet without the Greek recension, this remains highly speculative. Furthermore, if Bradshaw’s hypothesis is correct, the concerns elaborated in the text of *CHAR18* would be an absolute outlier within this family of late antique canonical texts, as all other translations of the *AT* that include their own various redactions preserve this canon without mentioning postpartum defilement.⁴³

Among comparative studies of recensions, Alessandro Bausi’s research on the *AT* within the newly discovered “Aksumite Collection” is particularly significant. As Bausi has argued, this ca. thirteenth-century Ethiopic manuscript reflects a redaction originating in an Alexandrian milieu during the height of the Christian Aksumite Kingdom, and attests to a direct Greek-to-Ge’ez translation. Based on both internal philological features and the ascriptions within the canonical collection, Bausi has argued that this specific compilation probably originated between the late fifth and seventh centuries.⁴⁴ Notably for our investigation,

feature as women’s space within Egypt historically and in modernity, see P. Grossmann, *Christliche Architektur in Ägypten*, *Handbuch der Orientalistik* 62 (Leiden, 2002), 111; R. G. Coquin, “Patriarchal Residences,” *The Coptic Encyclopedia* (New York, 1991), 6:1912a–3b.

42 Bradshaw and Bebawi, *Canons of Hippolytus*, 8–9. Although not discussed in detail here, Bradshaw’s thesis suggests that the Greek recension of the *CH* was likely lost relatively late, since Christians in Egypt only began writing in Arabic after the turn of the second millennium. On the use of Arabic among the Copts, see S. Rubenson, “Translating the Tradition: Some Remarks on the Arabization of the Patristic Heritage in Egypt,” *Medieval Encounters* 2.1 (1996): 4–14.

43 These include the Arabic and Ethiopic translations of the *AT* as well as the fifth-century church order known as the *Testamentum Domini* (2.4; J. Cooper and A. J. Maclean, trans., *The Testament of Our Lord* [Edinburgh, 1902], 119–20); P. F. Bradshaw et al., eds., *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, 2002), 100–101.

44 A table summarizing the comparable canons between his new find and other related sources is found in A. Bausi, “The ‘So-Called Traditio Apostolica’: Preliminary Observations on the New Ethiopic Evidence,” in *Volksglaube im antiken Christentum: Prof. Dr. Theofried Baumeister OFM zur Emeritierung*, ed. H. Grieser and A. Merkt

absolutely no postpartum purity concerns are found in the *AT* of the Aksumite Collection, thus suggesting that the late antique versions of the *AT* that circulated in Egypt even after Bradshaw supposes CHAr18 was redacted contained no such elaborations. Since all other surviving late antique canonical texts lack references to ritual purity for new mothers and midwives, it is highly speculative to assert that CHAr18 must have been modeled on a lost late antique version that deviated so drastically from other redactions of similar antiquity. While we cannot determine with certainty how long before the twelfth century CHAr18 may have been expanded from the version in the *AT*, and while it remains possible that it represents some unknown local recension that diverged from the mainstream already at an early date, the overwhelming body of evidence urges caution in assuming that CHAr18 must definitively be read as entirely reflective of fourth-century Egypt. On the contrary, as we will soon demonstrate, the textual developments in CHAr18 align precisely with concerns and debates regarding Levitical schedules for postpartum purification that emerged in early medieval Christian Egypt, and it is entirely possible that this recension belongs within a later canonical-liturgical milieu.

Earliest Egyptian Witnesses to Postnatal Purification

Given my argument effectively dismissing the reliability of CHAr18 as a witness to postnatal purification practices in late antique Egypt, a critical question arises: where and when did the Egyptian adoption of postpartum purification originate, and did it correspond to a Levitical distinction of a purification schedule based on the sex of the newborn? The earliest explicit references to post-birth purification can be traced already within the first millennium. In this case, however, it pertains not to mothers but to newborns, suggesting that some

Copts may originally have developed postpartum purity observances with a focus on the child and not the mother, similar to what Origen might imply, but in contrast to what we read in CHAr18.

The Bohairic *Life of Isaac* was authored by Mina, then bishop of Nikiou (80 km northwest of Cairo) and a contemporary of Isaac, the Coptic patriarch of Alexandria from 686 to 689 CE. While the *vita* survives in a manuscript dated to the ninth to tenth century, its customs most likely represent the northern Coptic liturgical tradition as practiced in the mid-seventh century, based on its precise and accepted authorship.⁴⁵ According to the *vita*, Isaac's parents presented him to the bishop for baptism only after a period of unspecified length had elapsed. As the text reads, "when the days were fulfilled for him to be baptized, according to the traditions of the Christians . . .," thus implying that an infant's ritual period of waiting after birth was widely recognized among the Copts of the time.⁴⁶ Although the text does not explicitly connect this waiting period to purification, the context strongly implies it, and this interpretation is further supported by a subsequent, similar narrative.

In southern Egypt, a reference to newborn purification appears in the *Encomium*, which is attributed to Archbishop Theodore of Antioch, on the fourth-century martyr Theodore the General, and preserved in a Sahidic manuscript dated no later than the tenth century.⁴⁷ The author claims to have served as the then-archbishop's attendant, positioning himself as an eyewitness to the events.⁴⁸ Eric Winstedt, however, remains

45 Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Copt. 62 (ninth/tenth century) (= VC62), fols. 211r–242v; A. van Lantschoot and A. Hebbelynck, *Codices Coptici Vaticani Barberiniani Borgiani Rossiani*, 2 vols., *Codices Coptici Vaticani* (Vatican City, 1937), 1:432–49. On its authorship and date, along with an edition and translation, see E. Porcher, ed., *Vie d'Isaac, Patriarche d'Alexandrie de 686 à 689*, PO 113 (54), (Turnhout, 2003), 301–2; D. Bell, trans., *The Life of Isaac of Alexandria and The Martyrdom of Saint Macrobios*, Monastic Studies Series 5 (Piscataway, NJ, 2009), 26–30.

46 ⲉⲧⲁⲓⲙⲟⲗ ⲁⲉ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ⲛⲧⲉ ⲛⲉⲣⲟⲟⲩ ⲁⲉ ⲣⲓⲛⲁ ⲛⲧⲟⲩ ⲧⲱⲙⲥ ⲛⲁⲩ ⲕⲁⲧⲁ ⲛⲓⲡⲁⲣⲁⲗⲟⲥⲓⲥ ⲛⲧⲉ ⲛⲓⲭⲣⲏⲧⲓⲁⲛⲟⲥ: VC62, fol. 211v; Porcher, *Vie d'Isaac*, 305. Earlier documented celebrations following a waiting period after the child's birth exist in Egypt, and scholarly arguments link them to post-birth purification as well: D. Montserrat, *Sex and Society in Greco-Roman Egypt* (New York, 2011), 33–34.

47 On its dating and locale, see W. Budge, ed., *Miscellaneous Coptic Texts in the Dialect of Upper Egypt*, vol. 5 (London, 1915), xxxiii–xxxv.

48 London, British Library, Or. 7030 (before 995 CE) (= BLOr7030), fol. 9v^b; items 118 and 143 in B. Layton, *Catalogue of Coptic Literary*

(Darmstadt, 2009), 291–321, at 293–95. For the Ge'ez edition and translation, see A. Bausi, "La nuova versione etiopica della Traditio apostolica: Edizione e traduzione preliminare," in *Christianity in Egypt: Literary Production and Intellectual Trends in Late Antiquity; Studies in Honor of Tito Orlandi*, ed. P. Buzi and A. Camplani, *Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum* 125 (Rome, 2011), 19–69, at 38–41. On the collection, see A. Bausi et al., "The Aksumite Collection or Codex Σ (*Sinodos of Qəfrəyā*, MS C₃-IV-71/C₃-IV-73, Ethio-SPaRe UM-039): Codicological and Palaeographical Observations: With a Note on Material Analysis of Inks," *COMSt Bulletin* 6.2 (2020): 127–71.

skeptical about the authenticity of this attribution and cautiously notes that the text was most likely revised.⁴⁹ His analysis of other hagiographies on Theodore attributed to the same writer suggests that this author may have been the eighth-century Archbishop Theodore (d. 773). Tito Orlandi supports this dating, considering the *Encomium*, along with other hagiographical works, as part of a “cycle” of literature that emerged between the sixth and eighth centuries.⁵⁰ Thus this text provides evidence from approximately the eighth century on the topic of purification observances for infants, with no reference to the birth mothers, comparable with the timing and evidence of the *Life of Isaac*. The narrative describes Archbishop Gaius naming and presenting the newborn Theodore in the church “when the days of purification were accomplished.”⁵¹ In this instance, the unspecified time lapse between birth and presentation in the church is explicitly linked to purification, reinforcing the account in Isaac’s vita. Isaac’s and Theodore’s narratives stress the infant’s impurity without mention of the mother, and unfortunately for us, neither text stipulates the specific number of days, nor whether this cycle of impurity was sex-specific and thus reflective of an adoption of Levitical practice interpreted for the infant.

The accounts of Isaac and Theodore reveal that the earliest Coptic references to postnatal purification focused on the impurity of the newborn. Within a century or two of these accounts, extant evidence begins to address the impurity of the mother. A Sahidic homily *On Archangel Michael*, preserved in a manuscript dating to the ninth or tenth century, provides what may indeed be our first testimony to the practice of a Leviticus-adhering, sex-specific postnatal purification of a mother that can be chronologically situated. Although the narrative is fragmented, enough of the text survives to reveal a composite of quotes from Leviticus on women’s purification. The manuscript records, “According to the term of her bleeding, and an additional sixty-six days in the blood of her defilement, so that she might not enter the

holy place until the days of her purification have passed, whether for a male or female.”⁵² Aside from an emphasis on the mother’s purification, unique to this work is its fidelity to Leviticus 12, delineating the initial and subsequent purification stages—an aspect seldom explicated in other sources. Then, the text concludes by quoting Leviticus 15 regarding menstruants and the need to be separated (πoρx) from them.⁵³ Although these extant passages are largely paraphrases of Levitical regulations and lack any surviving explicit admonition for postnatal women to follow a sex-dependent purification schedule, they are nevertheless suggestive of such regulations’ having currency at the time, just as other early medieval texts confirm that menstrual separation was practiced.⁵⁴

After these first references to the development of the postnatal purity practices, later medieval texts also reveal the rise of authors who contest or offer varying parameters of this very practice. Although these three witnesses from the late seventh to the tenth century are limited in scope and offer varied perspectives, their introduction aligns with broader Mediterranean trends of the time. The development of postpartum purity concerns in Egypt closely parallels those in greater Byzantium. As many scholars have pointed out, by the eighth century, life-cycle rituals and churching rites related to mothers and newborns in the Byzantine rite had been established to take place on the fortieth day after birth. Additionally, prayers for the churching of postpartum mothers also on the fortieth day were introduced starting around the tenth century and

Manuscripts in the British Library Acquired since the Year 1906 (London, 1987), 130–31, 164–65. For an edition, consult: Budge, *Miscellaneous Coptic Texts*, 5:10/587.

49 E. Winstedt, ed., *Coptic Texts on St. Theodore the General, St. Theodore the Eastern, Chamoul and Justus* (London, 1910), vi.

50 T. Orlandi, “Cycle,” *The Coptic Encyclopedia* (New York, 1991), 2:666a–68b.

51 ἡγεροχxωκ δε εβολ ἡβι ηεροογ ἡπεγτββο: BLOr7030, fol. 7v^a; Budge, *Miscellaneous Coptic Texts*, 5:8/584.

52 κατα πτωω ἡτεσωρω αχω κεσετασε ἡροογ εἰ ἡεσνογ ἡπεςxωεἰ δε ἡνεσβωκ ερογν επηα ετογααβ φαντοχxωκ εβολ ἡβι ηεροογ ἡπестββο кан оγροоγт пе кан оγсгime те: MLM, M592 (822–914 CE), fol. 50r^{a-b}; item 117 in Depuydt, *Manuscripts in the Pierpont Morgan Library*, 1:233. The text is verbatim from the oldest Sahidic edition of Leviticus, though quoted in a different verse order: MLM, MS M.566, fol. 17r^b; St. Demiana, *Sahidic Coptic Leviticus*, 35.

53 Here, as in other sources, various verbs emphasize that a menstrual woman was considered “separated,” implying isolation from society during her period of bleeding. Among others, this language is employed in the Sahidic redaction of Leviticus (εco ηκεα): MLM, MS M.566, fol. 28r^b; St. Demiana, *Sahidic Coptic Leviticus*, 254–55, 229–30. See also nn. 3, 9, 19, 24, and table 1, n. 5 above, as well as the evidence for rooms designated for menstruating women.

54 An eighth-century legal document attests to women from the town of Jeme in southern Egypt having a designated room to reside in during menstruation: T. G. Wilfong, *Women of Jeme: Lives in a Coptic Town in Late Antique Egypt*, New Texts from Ancient Cultures (Ann Arbor, 2002), 50–78 and passim. See also n. 4 above.

became prominent in later medieval Byzantine prayer books.⁵⁵ Similarly, Emperor Leo VI (866–912 CE) decreed that postpartum women should abstain from the Eucharist until forty days had passed.⁵⁶ Apart from Origen, who describes Levitical practices but does not indicate whether women abstained from the Eucharist and for how long following birth, and CHAR18, whose dating is questionable, the earliest documented concern for the purification of mothers in Egypt thus appears around the same time that similar concerns and practices emerged in the broader Christian East in the later first millennium. Whether such impurity concerns as encountered in the above Coptic texts reflect a direct influence of broader purity thinking in Eastern Christianity at the time or entirely local developments, these customs nevertheless encountered resistance.

The enigmatic author Ibn Nānā provided the first legislative text translated into Arabic among the Copts.⁵⁷ Accurately dating Ibn Nānā remains challenging, yet doing so is crucial to contextualizing his perspectives on the Copts' views of women's ritual purity. The scribal colophon associated with Ibn Nānā's autographed canons in the manuscript Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ar. 150 (1372 CE) mentions that an unnamed copyist transcribed the canons from an original edition dated to 1028.⁵⁸ His work, therefore, offers the earliest

canonical reference opposing statutory postpartum purification regulations in the Middle Ages. Thus it offers profound insight into ecclesiastical thought during the transition between the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, a time that shortly followed the emergence and spread of postpartum purity concerns as documented in the texts just examined.

Regarding women experiencing menorrhagia, Ibn Nānā states the relatively widespread Mediterranean Christian norm:

من قوانين باسيليوس الكبير المرأة الطامث ينبغي أن تمنع
من القربان إلى حين طهرها.⁵⁹

From the Canons of Basil the Great: The menstruating woman should be prevented from [receiving] the Eucharist until she is purified.

His emphasis on menstrual concerns, even invoking alleged hierarchical authority on the matter, arises at a time when both Egyptian Jews and Muslims had also begun to relax ritual purity concerns surrounding menstruation. The Jewish philosopher Maimonides (1138–1204) observed that Egyptian Jews had become lax regarding menstrual regulations, no longer observing the additional seven-day purity period after menstruation or washing in the *mikveh* (still practiced by Orthodox Jewish women after menstruation to this day), replacing these traditions with other customs.⁶⁰ Similarly, Ibn al-Hajj (d. 1336), a Muslim scholar deeply concerned with female purity rituals, criticized the widespread neglect of proper purity practices among fourteenth-century Cairene women.⁶¹

abī Ṣulḥ ibn Nānā: Yakshif ghumūd al-tārīkh al-litūrjī fī al-ʿuṣūr al-wuṣṭā (Cairo, 2019).

59 VAr150, fol. 118v^b. The sixth- to seventh-century canons attributed to Basil do not mention such a custom; cf. W. Riedel, ed., *Die Kirchenrechtsquellen des Patriarchats Alexandrien* (Leipzig, 1900), 231–83. However, Basil's "Short Rules" does testify to menstrual purity: *Asceticon Magnum* 309 (A. Silvas, ed., *The Asketikon of St. Basil the Great*, Oxford Early Christian Studies [Oxford, 2007], 445–46).

60 M. Friedman, "Social Realities in Egypt and Maimonides' Ruling in Family Law," in *Maimonides as Codifier of Jewish Law: Proceedings of the Second International Seminar on the Sources of Contemporary Law; Maimonides as Codifier of Jewish Law Jerusalem. August 1985*, ed. N. Rakover (Jerusalem, 1987), 225–36, at 231; Krakowski, "Maimonides," 245–89.

61 K. Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (London, 2013), 129, and passim; H. Lutfi,

55 Consult the discussion and previous studies of M. Arranz, V. Karras, M. Streett, and E. Afentoulidou cited in Glibetić, "Rites at Pregnancy Loss."

56 Novel 17 in P. Noailles and A. Dain, eds., *Les nouvelles de Léon VI le Sage: Texte et traduction* (Paris, 1944), 63–69. For known parallel customs in the Christian West, see D. van Slyke, "The Churching of Women: Its Introduction and Spread in the Latin West," *EphL* 115 (2001): 208–38.

57 In his introduction, Ibn Nānā expresses that he transmitted these canons into the Arabic language (نقل القوانين إلى اللغة العربية) without noting the original source: Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ar. 150 (1372 CE) (= VAr150), fol. 114r^a; S. Assemani and A. Mai, *Codices Arabici Bibliothecae Vaticanae* (Rome, 1831), 278–83. Due to the timing of his writing and the language transition in Egypt, the source language is most likely Coptic rather than Greek. Egypt's language shift to Arabic is discussed in M. S. A. Mikhail, *From Byzantine to Islamic Egypt* (London, 2014), 79–105, and, especially on the canonical tradition, see also Rubenson, "Translating the Tradition," 7–11.

58 VAr150, fol. 122v^b. On Ibn Nānā's place in Egypt's history, see G. Graf, ed., *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur* (= *GICAL*), 5 vols. Studi e Testi 118 (Vatican City, 1966), 1:320–21. For the most expansive work on this figure, including an Arabic edition based on a later codex, consult A. al-Maqārī, ed., *Mukhtaṣar qawānīn*

In relation to postpartum women, Ibn Nānā is the first to refer to a canon on postnatal purification, with a prescribed churching ritual involving bathing and an absolution prayer before resuming access to the Eucharist.⁶² But he grants women agency in deciding when this occurs, without recourse to biblical texts. Ibn Nānā states:

الذي يمنع النفساء بالذكر من القربان إلى أربعين يوماً
والأنثى ثمانين يوماً فهو على سنة يهودية وخطأ كبير
وينبغي للنفساء متى أحست من نفسها أنها قد تنقت من نزف
الدم وانبعث الرطوبات والماء الدموي أن تدخل الحمام
وتخرج منه إلى البيعة ليصلي عليها الكاهن صلاة التطهير
ويعطيها القربان ولا يمنعها منه بوجه ولا سبب.⁶³

He who bans a woman who gave birth to a male [child] from [receiving] the Eucharist until the fortieth day and with a female [child until] the eightieth day is following Jewish tradition and is in great error. It is necessary for the [postpartum] woman, that when she feels within herself that her blood flow, fluid discharge, and lochia have ceased, that she would enter the bath and then go to the church so that the priest prays the prayer of purification over her. Then he gives her the Eucharist and does not prevent her from it by any manner or reason.

Ibn Nānā attests to the practice of postpartum women being barred from liturgical participation based on the sex of their newborn, a practice seemingly alluded to by Origen and in the homily *On Archangel Michael*. Rather than adhering to a custom of fixed waiting

periods, Ibn Nānā advocated the cessation of postnatal blood discharge as the primary criterion for a woman's return to church and partaking of the Eucharist. In this way, Ibn Nānā aligns postpartum purification standards with those of menstruation: a woman may receive the Eucharist again once her blood flow has stopped. Given our discussion of the late antique evidence and its focus specifically on blood flow as opposed to fixed waiting periods around women's menstruation, it is likely that he is seeking to preserve established practices. Such a tradition is shared with the Copts' sister church in Syria, which from at least the early eighth century also received postpartum women once their discharge had ceased and they had undergone a ritual washing.⁶⁴ Ibn Nānā's stance distinctly separates Christian practices from what he identifies as Jewish customs—a recurring theme throughout his work—at a time when Egypt's Jewish community was active.⁶⁵ But his focus goes beyond merely differentiating Coptic observances from Jewish practices. The timing of his writings follows the earliest datable attestations of postnatal purification practices modeled on Leviticus 12 in Egypt. While Ibn Nānā directly challenges "Jewish observances" as he states, it was very likely that the rise of these customs within Coptic literature also informed his opposition. In turn, his resistance to a strictly applied Levitical postnatal purification, together with a silence around such within the more securely datable canonical record of late antique Christian Egypt, adds weight to our suggestion that this specific practice was being readily adopted by

"Manners and Customs of Fourteenth-Century Cairene Women: Female Anarchy versus Male Shar'i Order in Muslim Prescriptive Treatises," in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, ed. N. Keddie and B. Baron (New Haven, 1991), 99–121, at 108–9.

62 Aside from the practical means to cleanse bodily discharge, ritual washings appear to have been commonplace in society and followed a prescribed ritual order. For instance, in a work attributed to al-Mu'taman abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm ibn al-'Assāl (d. after 1265), the younger stepbrother of Šafi' ibn al-'Assāl, ablutions were required among female Copts after menstruation and postpartum bleeding before they reentered sacred space, showing some assimilation to Jewish and Muslim rituals: J. 'Awaḍ, ed., *Al-a'māl al-ra'isiyya fī al-ādāb al-kanasiyya* (Cairo, 1942), 19. On Ibrāhīm ibn al-'Assāl, see Graf, *GICAL*, 2:387–88, 407–14. For other Egyptian parallels, see nn. 3, 60, and 61 above.

63 VAr150, fol. 121^{a-b}.

64 Ibn Nānā's ritual framework aligns with that of Jacob of Edessa, who emphasizes the cessation of postpartum discharge and the act of washing as essential steps for new mothers to rejoin eucharistic participation. Additionally, Jacob explicitly forbids the exclusion of midwives from the Eucharist, indicating an awareness of the custom yet showing no concern for impurity through contact. See Vööbus, *The Synodicon*, 24, at 262/239, and Canons 17 and 18, at 271/246; and see also above, nn. 29, 30. In the received West Syrian tradition, whereas the infant could be baptized any time after two weeks from birth (passage of time from vaginal blood-contact culpability?), the new mother is received and blessed at the church door on the fortieth day, regardless of the sex of the child: M. Murad, ed., *The Sacrament of Holy Baptism According to the Ancient Rite of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch*, Syriac Liturgies for Worship 4 (Piscataway, NJ, 2011), 8–13.

65 In addition, Ibn Nānā challenges certain Jewish practices observed by Christians, by urging them to work on Saturdays and abstain from fasting on that day (except for Holy Saturday), revealing his intention to delineate a Christian identity: VAr150, fol. 117^v. See above, n. 7 on Jews in medieval Egypt.

Copts only in the later first millennium. In turn, Ibn Nānā's willingness to discount a custom that CHAr18 upholds as an ancient practice could imply that this canonist at a transitional phase in Egypt's history was either unfamiliar with CHAr18 or did not regard it as sufficiently representative of authentic ancient Christian tradition, thereby suggesting some potential—even if inconclusive—coordinates for contextualizing CHAr18.

Convergence and Divergence in the Later Medieval Legislative and Liturgical Sources

Egypt's so-called Golden Era of Copto-Arabic literature blossomed between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. During this period, prolific Coptic authors produced numerous extensive legal documents and an array of liturgical guides and commentaries in Arabic to govern the church. These later medieval sources—created by hierarchs, clergy, influential laity, and other contributors—emerged amid complex inter- and intra-Christian as well as sociopolitical polemics and apologetics. With heightened attention to ritual purity regulations, these sources converge on many fronts, though not without divergence, sometimes standing in opposition to one another.

Collections of Canons: Historical Record or Practiced Ritual?

In later centuries, the Copts regarded the nomocanons of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as authoritative, regardless of their immediate relevance.⁶⁶ The authors of these nomocanons organized earlier regulations thematically, often disregarding the contextual norms specific to the original canons. They incorporated rules from various ecclesiastical contexts, including churches not in communion with the Copts, as well as civil compendiums, resisting the removal of outdated legislation that no longer aligned with the Copts' evolving religious and social environment. When new canons were issued, future canonists typically integrated them into their collections.

66 Aside from being recopied by later authors, nomocanons stood as the primary point of reference for Coptic patriarchs, as exemplified by their pivotal role during the tenure of John XII (r. 1484–1524): M. Guirguis and N. van Doorn-Harder, *The Emergence of the Modern Coptic Papacy: The Egyptian Church and Its Leadership from the Ottoman Period to the Present*, Popes of Egypt 3 (Cairo, 2012), 15.

Nomocanons addressing reproductive blood impurities exhibit two notable features. By 1131 CE, Coptic nomocanonists routinely included CHAr18 and began incorporating laws from the Melkites, Egypt's Orthodox community that accepted the decrees from the first council of Chalcedon in 451. Melkite canons prominently emphasize the impurity of the infant rather than that of the mother, reflecting themes drawn from our earlier discussed *vita* and *Encomium*. Conflicts and inconsistencies within the literature suggest that although authors preserved these regulations in historical compilations, a nomocanon may not always accurately reflect the prevailing practices of the time and place in which it was compiled.

Three Coptic authors created almost identical nomocanons with attention to ritual purity. Gabriel II ibn Turaik (r. 1131–1145) compiled the first legal compendium as a layman shortly before his papacy, though the legislation he promulgated as patriarch did not address the matter.⁶⁷ Around 1188, Mikhā'il (1130/40–1208), metropolitan of Dumyāt, collected and transcribed earlier canons, forming a work almost identical to Gabriel II's and referencing it in his appendix. He also authored a work criticizing Melkite praxis, known as *The Customs That Distinguish the Copts*, which contradicts his nomocanon on the topic of Communion abstinence, as I assert below.⁶⁸ Lastly, al-Ṣafi ibn al-ʿAssāl (d. between 1253 and 1270), a wealthy lay aristocrat from the Awlād al-ʿAssāl family, wrote a subsequent nomocanon by 1238, known as *al-Ṣafi's Collection*.⁶⁹ This work was promulgated and authorized during the turbulent papacy of Cyril III ibn Laqlaq (r. 1235–1243),⁷⁰ became

67 See his total of forty-two canons in PAR251, fols. 347r–351v; O. H. E. Burmester, ed., “The Canons of Gabriel Ibn Turaik, LXX Patriarch of Alexandria,” *Le Muséon* 46 (1933): 43–54, idem, “The Canons of Gabriel Ibn Turaik LXX Patriarch of Alexandria,” *OCP* 1 (1935): 6–45.

68 On the two varied redactions of this work, see A. al-Maqārī, ed., *Majmū' qawānīn al-Anbā Mikhā'il muṭrān Dumyāt fī al-qarn al-thānī 'ashar al-milādī*, 2 vols. (Cairo, 2016–2017), 1:42–51; G. Graf, *Ein Reformversuch innerhalb der koptischen Kirche im zwölften Jahrhundert* (Paderborn, 1923).

69 On these three nomocanonists respectively consult Graf, *GCAL*, 2:324–27, 333–35, and 387–403.

70 On this patriarch's life see the discussion and associated bibliography in B. Sadek, ed., *Cyril Ibn Laqlaq's Book of Confession: A Critical Edition and Annotated Translation with an Introduction*, Texts and Studies in Eastern Christianity 29 (Brill, 2023), 3–31.

extraordinarily influential,⁷¹ and was widely disseminated within and beyond Egypt.⁷² Since the canons are reproduced almost verbatim across these three sources, they can be considered a single work in the context of ritual preparedness, with Mikhā'il's redaction represented below.

Gabriel II, Mikhā'il, and al-Ṣafi's regulations on ritual purity originate from two main canons: the pseudo-Nicaean Arabic Canons and CHAR18. While we have already discussed the latter at length above, scholars believe the former to be of Syrian origin and commonly attribute them to Bishop Mārūtā of Maipherqaṭ (d. 420 CE). Arthur Vööbus traces the transmission of these canons from Syria to Egypt via the Melkites, who incorporated them into their ecclesiastical laws.⁷³ The copied canon states:

نقيية القانون التاسع والعشرون
لا تدخل المرأة الحائض إلى الكنيسة ولا تقترب إلى أن
تتقضي أيام طمثها وتطهر منه ولو كانت من نساء الملوك
لكن تلزم بيتها وإن تعدى أحد من القسوس أو الشماسية على
دفع القربان لها أو أدخلها الكنيسة في تلك الأيام ولم يردّها إلى
منزلها فليسقط من درجته ويخرج من الجماعة. . . .

أبوليدس القانون الثامن عشر في القوابل
النساء القوابل لا ينلن السرائر المقدسة إلا بعد أن يتطهرن
أولاً هكذا إن كان المولود ذكرًا عشرين يومًا وإن كانت أنثى
أربعين يومًا ولا يدعن النفاس بل يصلين على التي قبلت وإذا
مضت إلى بيت الله قيل أن تتطهر فلنكن مع المتعطين الذين لم
يقبلوا بعد والمرأة التي تلد فلتقم خارجًا عن الموضع المقدس

71 A copy of al-Ṣafi's nomocanon was distributed to each Coptic diocese within Egypt, and it was incorporated into West Syrian literature by 'Abd Allāh Qara'ali and in al-Ṭukhī's euchologion for the Catholic Copts: Kaufhold, "Sources of Canon Law," 285–86.

72 Al-Ṣafi's nomocanon was expanded and translated as the code of church canon law for the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, known as the "Fetha Nagašt" or "The Laws of the Melkites," which is thought to have been translated in the fifteenth century from Arabic into Ge'ez by Buṭrus ibn 'Abd al-Sayyid. According to Guidi, it was dependent upon Roman-Byzantine regulations, spanning from 480 to 726 CE, which explains the documentation of multiple extraordinary laws, though possibly not enacted in Egypt: I. Guidi, *Il 'Fetha Nagašt' o 'Legislazione dei re': Codice ecclesiastico e civile d'Abissinia*, vol. 2 (Rome, 1897), xv–xvi, 9. Authorship is contested in Riedel, *Die Kirchenrechtsquellen*, 118–19.

73 The regulations stem from the Procheiros Nomo and the Syro-Roman Law Book, which influenced Arabic Melkite circles: A. Vööbus, ed., *The Canons Ascribed to Mārūtā of Maipherqaṭ and Related Sources: Syriac Text with an Introduction*, CSCO 439–40, Scriptores Syri 191–92 (Leuven, 1982), xxii–xxiii; Riedel, *Die Kirchenrechtsquellen*, 296–98.

أربعين يومًا إن كان الذي ولدته ذكرًا وإن كانت أنثى في
ثمانين يومًا وإذا دخلت الكنيسة فلتصل مع المتعطين والقوابل
فليكن كثيرات لنلا يكن خارجًا في طول حياتهن.⁷⁴

[Pseudo-]Nicaea, the Twenty-Ninth Canon

A menstruating woman shall not enter the church nor commune until the end of her menstruation and until she is pure. Even if she were a queen, she should remain in her house. If any of the priests or deacons transgress by offering her Communion or allow [a menstruating woman] to enter the church on those days without sending her home, he shall fall from his rank and be expelled from the congregation. . . .

Hippolytus, the Eighteenth Canon: On Midwives

Female midwives are not to receive the holy mysteries until they are first purified. Their purification shall be thus: if the child she delivered is male, twenty days; if it were female, forty days.⁷⁵ They shall not neglect postnatal women, but they are to pray for she who has delivered [a child]. If she goes to the house of God before being purified, she should be with the catechumens who have not yet been received. Let the woman who has given birth remain outside the holy place forty days if the child she has borne is male and eighty days if it is female. If she enters the church, she is to pray with the catechumens. The midwives are to be numerous so that they may not be segregated all the days of their lives.

74 Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Diez.A.quart 117 (1210 CE) (= BS117), fol. 237r–v; manuscript 10180 in W. Ahlwardt, *Verzeichnis der arabischen Handschriften*, Die Handschriftenverzeichnisse der Königlichen Bibliothek zu Berlin 9 (Berlin, 1897), 532–39. For an edition, see al-Maqārī, *Majmū' qawānīn al-Anbā Mikhā'il*, 2:687–89. On the other two nomocanons referenced, see Gabriel: A. 'A. Minā, ed., *Majmū' qawānīn Ghubriyāl ibn Turayk al-baṭriyark al-sabīn* (1131–1145), 2 vols., al-Turāth al-'arabī al-masīhī 12–13 (Beirut, 1993), 1:238–39; al-Ṣafi: J. 'Awaḍ, ed., *al-Majmū' al-Ṣafawī: Kitāb al-qawānīn al-kanā'isiyya li-kanisat al-Aqbāt al-urthūdhuksiyyīn alladhī jamā'ahu al-'allāma al-qibṭī al-ṭayyib al-dhikr wa-l-athar al-Shaykh al-Ṣafi abū al-Faḍāl ibn al-'Assāl fi sanat AM 955 / 1238 CE*, 2 vols. (Cairo, 1908), 2:234.

75 J. M. Vansleb, the German protoethnographer who studied Coptic communities in Egypt during the seventeenth century, describes (or perhaps prescribes) midwives still adhering to these guidelines: J. M. Vansleb, *Histoire de l'Église d'Alexandrie, fondée par S. Marc, que nous appelons celle des Jacobites-Coptes d'Égypte: Ecrite au Caire même, en 1672 & 1673* (Paris, 1677), 107.

The subsequent canon on the matter, derived from the *Laws of the Melkites*, addresses the baptism of infants in near-death situations and extends purity concerns to newborns, attributing culpability to the mother's afterbirth discharge. This canon contrasts with the previously copied canon by the same authors, as it does not distinguish between purification rites for different sexes, since such a distinction was unknown to the Byzantine canonico-liturgical tradition:

من قوانين الملوك في حدود إمساك الأطفال
إن تخوف على المولود من حادثة الموت قبل أن يتم
أربعين يوماً فيدخل مع امرأة غريبة غير أمه إلى الكنيسة
ويعمد ولو أنه قيل موته بساعة وأكثر من ذلك أو أقل فإن
المولود ما حرم دخول الكنيسة وتعميده عاجلاً إلا بسبب
دم أمه وذلك أنها ترضعه وتغذيه . . . فإن لم يحدث عليه
الموت فلا يدخل إلى الكنيسة ولا يعمد إلا على سنة الكنيسة
الجامعة الرسولية وإن حدث الموت بالنفساء فلتغتسل
بالماء غسلًا نظيفًا وتكفن بأكفان جدد وثياب غير الثياب
التي ولدت فيها وتدخل الكنيسة ويصلى عليها ولا تتجس
أحدًا من النصارى ولا يقال إنها طامث لأن الموت قد
طهرها الذي هو خيرة الله لجميع الناس وأما ما سوى ذلك
فلا يصلى على أحد إلا على طهر.⁷⁶

From the *Laws of the Melkites*:
On the Limits of Carrying Children

If there is fear that a newborn might die before he has completed forty days, he is to enter the church with a strange woman other than his mother to be baptized, even if it is an hour before his death, more or less. For the newborn is not forbidden to enter the church and be baptized immediately except for his mother's blood; because she breast-feeds and nourishes him. . . .⁷⁷ If he is not [in

danger] of death, he should not enter the church and he should not be baptized except according to the tradition of the Catholic and apostolic church. If death occurs to the mother, she should be washed with clean water and shrouded in new shrouds and clothes other than the clothes in which she gave birth, and she enters the church and they pray over her.⁷⁸ None of the Christians shall consider her impure nor should it be said that she is menstruating since death has purified her, which is the will of God for all people. In any other situation, no one is to be prayed over unless they are pure.

The *Laws of the Melkites*, mistakenly attributed to the fathers of the First Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, address the issue of emergency baptism for infants.⁷⁹ Unlike the purification period based on Leviticus 12 in CHARI8 cited by these nomocanonists, the *Laws of the*

blood, though in a distinct context. His connection centered on the Eucharist, emphasizing the idea of offering one's own body as nourishment rather than concerns about ritual purity. His eucharistic motif is reinterpreted here to suggest that impurities in blood can be transmitted through breast milk: Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogos* 1.6.39 (S. Wood, trans., *Christ the Educator*, The Fathers of the Church 23 [Washington, DC, 1954], 37–39). Berger develops this idea: *Gender Differences*, 72–80. On menstrual blood turning into breast milk, see G. Pedrucci, "Sangue mestruale e latte materno: Riflessioni e nuove proposte intorno all'allattamento nella Grecia antica," *Gesnerus* 70.2 (2013): 260–91; C. Audouit, "Women's Intimacy: Blood, Milk, and Women's Conditions in the Gynecological Papyri of Ancient Egypt," in *Women in Ancient Egypt: Revisiting Power, Agency, and Autonomy*, ed. M. Ayad (Cairo, 2022), 381–94, at 387–89.

78 While this canon explicitly calls for washing and dressing the deceased in new garments, it seems universally understood that all corpses would be washed and clothed before the funeral: O. H. E. Burmester, *The Egyptian or Coptic Church: A Detailed Description of Her Liturgical Services and the Rites and Ceremonies Observed in the Administration of Her Sacraments*, Publications de la Société d'archéologie copte: Textes et documents (Cairo, 1967), 201. Medieval Copto-Arabic funerary manuscripts outline various customs for handling the corpse of a mother who dies during childbirth. The received tradition, however, reflects no concerns regarding ritual impurity associated with giving birth.

79 On interpolating other churches' canonical literature, especially Melkite sources, into the Coptic Church, see Kaufhold, "Sources of Canon Law," 273. On the prevalence of children's death, consult S. M. Wheeler, L. Williams, and T. L. Dupras, "Infancy and Childhood in Roman Egypt: Bioarchaeological Perspectives," in *Children in Antiquity: Perspectives and Experiences of Childhood in the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. L. A. Beaumont, M. Dillon, and N. Harrington (London, 2021), 581–93.

76 BS117, fols. 237v–238v; al-Maḡārī, *Majmū' qawānīn al-Anbā Mikhā'il*, 2:689–90. Gabriel: Mīnā, *Majmū' qawānīn Ghubriyāl*, 1:239–40. Emphasis in translation added. Each collector is granted autonomy to organize the canons into different topics, sometimes even duplicating identical canons in various chapters when contextually relevant. Consequently, al-Ṣafī's nomocanon does not specify a definite waiting period for the infant, and excludes the remainder of the directive concerning a mother's death during childbirth and regulations pertaining to her burial. Instead, al-Ṣafī emphasizes that a child in imminent danger of death can be baptized immediately if brought to the church by someone other than the mother. This, however, does not change the premise of the canon: cf. Awaḍ, *al-Majmū' al-Ṣafawī*, 1:16, 70, 75.

77 In the second century, Clement (150–215 CE), an instructor at Alexandria's Catechetical School, had associated breast milk with

Melkites mandate a fixed “cooling-off” period of forty days for both mother and infant, regardless of the sex of the child. The postponement of baptism reflects a concern for the child’s purity, which is consistent with Byzantine practices and the *vita* and *Encomium* discussed above. This regulation allows for an exception in emergencies, specifying who may bring the child to the church, but frames the issue within the Byzantine practice of a non-sex-specific, forty-day impurity period.⁸⁰ These competing and contradictory regulations underscore fundamental problems in interpreting and applying nomocanons. They neither necessarily represent Coptic traditions on the ground nor were universally applicable. The contradictions between nomocanons and newly composed canons by Coptic hierarchs further highlight the archaic nature of these collections.

Novel Canons: A Testament to Observances

In addition to the wealth of nomocanonical compilations, Egypt experienced a notable surge in new codes of canon law written during the Middle Ages. Beginning in the eighth century, various church leaders began crafting concise, new canons addressing contemporary concerns. These novel regulations sought to condemn specific behaviors or encourage others and thus reflect the socio-cultural and ecclesiastical dynamics of their time, rather than merely preserving norms from a variety of centuries and different places, as seen in the nomocanons.

After completing his nomocanon, Mikhā’il of Dumyāt issued statements to define Coptic identity in opposition to Melkite customs, despite having included some Melkite practices in his very nomocanon. In his *Customs That Distinguish the Copts*, Mikhā’il emphasized the importance of regular eucharistic participation, a stance somewhat at odds with his earlier

nomocanon. He highlights the salvific power of the Eucharist and urges frequent Communion reception, cautioning against extended abstention in order to avoid susceptibility to Satan’s influences. After citing various biblical passages referring to the reception of Christ’s body and blood (Matthew 26:26–28, John 6:56, 54, and 1 Corinthians 11:26), Mikhā’il admonishes:

ففي هذه الأقوال قد عرف الإيمان والغفران بالقربان ولما أخرج أبو مقار الكبير شيطان من المرأة قال إن تمكنه منها كان بسبب بعدها عن تناول القربان وهذا هو رسم القبط منذ تلمذهم مرقس الرسول.⁸¹

These sayings reveal that faith and forgiveness are found in the Eucharist. When Abba Macarius the Great cast out a demon from a woman, he said that the demon’s hold on her was due to her abstention from partaking of the Eucharist. This has been the practice of the Copts since their discipleship under Mark the Apostle.

Mikhā’il supports his teaching of regular and frequent eucharistic participation by alluding to the story of Macarius the Great (300–391 CE), who healed a woman who was afflicted owing to her five-week abstinence from Communion reception.⁸² The narrative holds added significance given that its main character is female, and so presumably would have refrained from

80 Ibn Nānā permits emergency baptisms during Great Lent (a period when baptisms were typically deferred until the Feast of Resurrection or even Pentecost) by a deacon in the absence of a priest and when a priest is not fasting: VAr150, fols. 118r^a, 119r^b, 121r^b. Gabriel V gives similar provisions: PAr98, fol. 127v; ‘Abdallah, *L’ordinamento*, 129/331. A regulation advises medieval Coptic clergy to save sanctified baptismal water for emergency baptisms, a custom attributed to the time of Athanasius (d. 373 CE), as known from the polymath Ibn al-Rāhib (1205–1295): Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ar. 104 (1282 CE), fol. 68r; Assemani and Mai, *Codices Arabici*, 212–14. For a partial edition of the liturgical portion of this work, see S. Khalil, ed., “Maqāla fi al-qurbān al-muqaddas wa-l-ma’mūdiyya mansūba ilā al-qiddis Athanāsīyūs al-rasūlī dhakaraha Abū Shākīr ibn al-Rāhib,” *al-Mashriq* 66 (1992): 235–41, at 239.

81 PAr251, fol. 341r; O. H. E. Burmester, ed., “The Sayings of Michael, Metropolitan of Damietta,” *OCP* 2 (1936): 101–28, at 114/124–25.

82 The narrative only occurs in Palladius’s *Historia Lausiaca*, 17.6–9 (W. Budge, ed., *The Paradise, or Garden, of the Holy Fathers*, vol. 1 [London, 1907], 115–16). The story of Macarius’s teaching serves as an exemplar, mentioned in various medieval discussions on Communion reception: Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ar. 123 (1396 CE) (= VAr123), fol. 20r; Assemani and Mai, *Codices Arabici*, 245–46. For an edition, consult ‘A. ‘Abdallah, ed., “Un trattato inedito sulla SS. Eucaristia (Ms. Vat. Ar. 123, 1396 A.D.): Testo originale e traduzione,” *Aegyptiaca Collectanea* 12 (1967): 345–464, at 399/445. On Macarius’s narrative through the lens of magic and counter-magic, see D. Frankfurter, “The Perils of Love: Magic and Counter-magic in Coptic Egypt,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10.3, 4 (2001): 480–500. In Byzantine customs, monastics faced disciplinary measures for abstaining from the Eucharist for a duration exceeding forty days: R. Taft, “Changing Rhythms of Eucharistic Frequency in Byzantine Monasticism,” in *Il monachesimo tra eredità e aperture: Atti del simposio “Testi e temi nella tradizione del monachesimo cristiano” per il 50° anniversario dell’Istituto Monastico di Sant’Anselmo, Roma, 28 maggio–1 giugno 2002*, ed. M. Bielawski and D. Hombergen (Rome, 2004), 419–58, at 447.

the Eucharist at times due to vaginal bleeding. Mikhā'il concludes that regularly receiving Communion has been a Coptic tradition since the church's foundation in the first century. His newly issued teaching contrasts with CHAr18, which prohibits new mothers from receiving the Eucharist for up to eighty days—almost six weeks longer than the abstinence period that supposedly led to the woman's possession. This apparent contradiction with his own nomocanon highlights the imitative nature of this genre: not all canonical regulations contained in a nomocanon necessarily represent the practices or beliefs of their compilers. Thus while CHAr18 was clearly accepted by some within Egypt's canonical and liturgical history, its presence in Mikhā'il's nomocanon does not necessarily reflect his personal views or the practices he encouraged regarding eucharistic abstinence.

In 1238 CE, Cyril III endorsed a series of canons that include regulations on women's impurity. Like other authors, Cyril III reiterates the prohibition against menstruating women entering the church, thereby also barring them from receiving the Eucharist, and advises postponing the baptism of menstruating women until they are purified.⁸³ He initiates new discussions on ritual preparedness, particularly concerning impurity through contact with new mothers and the required length of postnatal separation. He explores whether a married priest whose wife has recently given birth can still officiate at the eucharistic liturgy. Although his canon primarily emphasizes the ritual readiness and piety required of married clergy to preside and receive Communion, it also provides valuable insights into the religious and cultural views regarding women undergoing postpartum discharge and the associated purification periods.⁸⁴ He advises:

ولا يمنع قسيس من خدمته إذا ولدت زوجته بشرط أن لا يخالطها مدة نفسها الذكر والأنثى.⁸⁵

A priest is not prevented from his service if his wife has given birth, provided he does not *interact*⁸⁶ with her during her purification, whether it is for a male or female child.

Cyril III clarifies that a priest may serve liturgy and receive the Eucharist if he avoids contact with his wife during her impurity. He remains vague about the required purification length, though his comment “whether it is for a male or female child” could suggest an allusion to two different lengths, influenced by al-Ṣafī's guidance and his adoption of CHAr18. Alternatively, the purification may simply refer to the cessation of postpartum discharge, indicating that recovery time for mothers who birthed daughters was thought to be longer than for sons.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, Cyril III's ritual framework remains consistent, as he later reiterates the prohibition of conjugal relations during Lent, Holy Week, and a woman's “menstrual and postpartum bleeding” (وأيام حيضها ونفاسها), underscoring cessation of bleeding as essential for purification, and thus eucharistic participation.⁸⁸ His model of avoiding contact with women experiencing vaginal blood discharge was

83 PA251, fols. 354v, 355v; O. H. E. Burmester, ed., “The Canons of Cyril III Ibn Laklak, 75th Patriarch of Alexandria (A.D. 1235–1250): Part I,” *BSAC* 12 (1949): 81–136, at 87, 89/107, 112. The latter canon stems from *AT* 20 and recurs frequently in Coptic canonical literature.

84 In her study, Blackman observed that the tradition of a *husband's avoiding contact with his wife for seven days after childbirth*, and speaking only from a distance, persisted in modern southern Egyptian households, reflecting concerns beyond the clergy: W. Blackman, *The Fellahin of Upper Egypt* (Cairo, 2000), 76. The emphasis on seven days highlights a significant concern with the culpability of impurity at the onset of the postpartum period, which seems to have been relaxed afterward.

85 PA251, fol. 360v. Emphasis in translation added. For the Arabic edition and a contested translation, see Burmester, “Canons of Cyril III,” 102/134. A similar, though abbreviated, stipulation was already known in *CH* 8.

86 The Arabic verb with its affixed object, يخالطها (to interact with her), introduces ambiguity, as it may imply either mere contact or conjugal relations. Other verbs could have indicated more explicitly the avoidance of intercourse during the postpartum phase, as prescribed by the Arabic canons of Ps.-Basil. While Burmester's translation emphasizes sexual relations, I prefer a broader interpretation because of the specific verb choice, especially given that other canonical practices imply that sexual abstinence before Communion was already presumed. H. Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, ed. M. Cowan, 3rd ed. (New York, 1976), 255b. For Ps.-Basil, see PA251, fol. 360v; A. al-Maqārī, ed., *Miṣriyyat al-qawānīn al-kanāsiyya al-mansūba li-l-qiddīs Bāsīliyūs al-kabīr* (Cairo, 2014), 142.

87 See n. 8 above.

88 PA251, fol. 357r; Burmester, “Canons of Cyril III,” 93/120. On the cleric's knowledge of preserving the marriage bed on the eve of partaking of Communion and throughout Great Lent, see the early evidence in W. Crum, ed., *Coptic Ostraca from the Collections of the Egypt Exploration Fund, the Cairo Museum and Others* (London, 1902), 9, nos. 29 and 30.

commonplace across the Mediterranean and usually required purification prayers.⁸⁹

Medieval Liturgical Books and Guides

Between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, Coptic authors produced at least six liturgical manuals. Regulations for menstruants remained consistent from antiquity, though in some isolated cases they became even more stringent. Regarding postnatal purification, one might expect the inclusion of CHAr18 in earlier Coptic canonical collections to have significantly influenced later liturgical guides. But CHAr18 appears only once, in a later work of Ibn Kabar (d. 1324), and without attribution. To ascertain postnatal exclusions from eucharistic participation, it is essential to examine the rituals associated with baptism, particularly those for the reintroduction or churching of the mother and child after childbirth, in both described and prescribed contexts. As we shall see, the liturgical guides reflect both internal and external competing paradigms of purification and oscillate in designating either the mother, the child, or both as impure due to afterbirth discharge.

The anonymous thirteenth-century work known as the *Guide to the Beginners and the Correction of the Laity* contains chapters on church etiquette for laity and clergy.⁹⁰ The *Guide to the Beginners* exists in at least two slightly different manuscript redactions, which propose different regulations.⁹¹ Regarding menorrhagia, the text stipulates that the marriage rite should not take place when the bride-to-be is menstruating, as she should not enter the church or receive the

Eucharist—an essential act in solemnizing the marriage—until she is purified from her menses.⁹²

The *Guide to the Beginners* provides perinatal purification customs in the mother's churching rite, which, after Ibn Nānā, represents the earliest known detailed Coptic characterization of postpartum women's reintroduction to sacred space. The redactions vary, however, regarding how long after childbirth this should occur and whether impurity is attributed solely to the mother or also includes the newborn. The older redaction, VAr117, dated to 1323 and copied from a *Vorlage* dating to 1286, provides details on how the churching rite occurs, yet omits any discussion of when.⁹³ In contrast, the slightly later version, BC9, completed in 1353, introduces a sex-specific, calendrical defilement period for the newborn in addition to the mother:

إذا كان الولد ذكرًا يحضر إلى الكنيسة بعد أربعين يومًا
وإن كانت بنتًا فيكون بعد ثمانين يومًا ثم تحضر إلى باب
الكنيسة وتحلل.⁹⁴

A male child comes to the church after forty days, and if she were a female, then after eighty days. Then she [the mother] goes to the church door to be absolved.

Variations in redactions may result from scribes' interpolations which reflect the customs of their time and locale, aligning his edition with current trends. Yet, more broadly, the differences continually exhibited

89 Twelfth-century Russian Christian men avoided *contact* with new mothers until a ritual prayer was said to "purify" the mother and the birthplace, and a fifteenth-century Byzantine rite for stillbirths also addressed contamination through absolution prayers or the passage of time: Larin, "Ritual Im/Purity," 289; Glibetić, "Rites at Pregnancy Loss," 159. See also above, n. 84.

90 The text is commonly attributed to Cyril III, though it still remains anonymous: M. al-Baramūsi, *Dallāl al-mubtadi'īn wa-tahdhīb al-ilmāniyyīn* (Cairo, 2020), 14–16.

91 Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Ar. 117 (1323 CE) (= VAr117), fols. 197r–205v, forms the base text of the German edition: G. Graf, ed., "Liturgische Anweisungen des koptischen Patriarchen Kyrillos ibn Laklak," *JbLw* 4 (1924): 119–34. On this manuscript, see Assemani and Mai, *Codices Arabici*, 237–41. An Arabic edition with a base text from Scetis, Monastery of al-Baramūs, Canon 9 (1353 CE) (= BC9), fols. 31–39r, was published in al-Baramūsi, *Dallāl*, 76–108.

92 VAr117, fol. 204r (five to six days after menstruation); Graf, "Liturgische Anweisungen," 131. BC9, fols. 26v–27r (after the days of menstruation and she is completely purified); Asyūt, Monastery of al-Muḥarraq, Canon 12 (undated), fol. 103v (purified from her menstruation in eleven days); al-Baramūsi, *Dallāl*, 97 and 142, respectively.

93 In chapter 15, on the postnatal absolution, the author states: "When they [the new mothers] attend church, they stand at the church's entrance, and the priest prays on them the absolution prayer at the liturgy's readings before the prayer of the gospel. Those [women] who do not attend from the beginning of the liturgy are not absolved. Only the liturgy's celebrant priest or his cōcelebrant may absolve them. It is not permitted for any priest to absolve them during the Anaphora." For the original text, see VAr117, fol. 203v; and for the German edition, Graf, "Liturgische Anweisungen," 130.

94 The author notes that in his time during the mid-thirteenth century, it was more customary for the churching to occur in the "house of women" (بيت النساء), rather than at the church door, as the ritual traditionally prescribes: BC9, fols. 25v–26r; al-Baramūsi, *Dallāl*, 95 and n. 41 above.

in these sources demonstrate competing purification practices still in their developmental phases, as further argued below based on more sources.

The anonymous *Order of the Priesthood*, from the thirteenth century, addresses various theological and moral issues, as well as clerical duties.⁹⁵ After a discourse on death caused by Adam's fall and the restoration of creation through Christ achieved in baptism, the author states in the section on "Baptism":

ولما علم معلمي البيعة المقدسة أن ذلك كذلك اجتهدوا وحرصوا على تعميد الأطفال وهم صغار ولو عمرهم أربعين يوماً.⁹⁶

When the teachers of the holy church knew that this was the case,⁹⁷ they strove and were eager to baptize children while they were young, even if they were only forty days old.

Although the author does not explicitly address purification concerns for the mother or child, the mention of baptism at forty days implies an undertone of postnatal purification for the child, seemingly similar to the *vita* and *Encomium* discussed above as well as to Byzantine rites, without regard to their sex.⁹⁸

The examples above regarding the mother's churching appear in descriptive works on liturgical actions. Attention to prescribed praxis in baptismal ordines provides further insight into actual customs. A recently accessed codex containing medieval initiation

95 The work is wrongly attributed to the tenth-century Coptic bishop known as Severus ibn al-Muqaffa'. It is known from a single manuscript, Cairo, Coptic Patriarchate, Theology 236 (1719 CE) (= CPT 236), fols. 128r–162r, for which Assfalg furnished an edition and translation: J. Assfalg, ed., *Die Ordnung des Priestertums: Ein altes liturgisches Handbuch der koptischen Kirche*, *Optica* 1 (Cairo, 1955). Manuscript 341 in M. Simaika and Y. 'Abd al-Masih, *Catalogue of the Coptic and Arabic Manuscripts in the Coptic Museum, the Patriarchate, the Principal Churches of Cairo and Alexandria and the Monasteries of Egypt*, 3 vols. (Cairo, 1939–1942), 2:145.

96 CPT₂₃₆, fol. 131r; Assfalg, *Die Ordnung*, 7/74.

97 In reference to the importance of baptism after Adam's fall and Christ's redemptive works.

98 If studies on modern lifestyles provide insights into late medieval Coptic Egypt, it can be inferred that new mothers traditionally remained home for forty days, after which the churching rite would take place in the mother's home: S. Morsy, "Childbirth in an Egyptian Village," in *Anthropology of Human Birth*, ed. M. Kay (Philadelphia, 1982), 166–72.

rites, preserved at the church known as Sts. Sergius and Bacchus in Old Cairo, is Abū Sarja Liturgy 80 (ASL80), dated by Simon the Scribe at the conclusion of this rite to the year 1272.⁹⁹ This Copto-Arabic baptismal ordo, presented here for the first time, predates what scholars have long believed to be the oldest surviving medieval Coptic baptismal ritual (discussed below) by more than thirty-five years.¹⁰⁰ While baptismal rituals of antiquity did not include purification prayers, ASL80 begins with a title for the initial prayer in the baptismal rite proper: “A prayer of absolution said upon the mother of the child.”¹⁰¹ Although this supplication is named for the mother, it also addresses the purification of the infant. The rubric does not specify how long after childbirth this ritual should take place, and the prayer block emphasizes that the purification of both mother and child occurs after they have waited “a few days.”¹⁰² Since the prayer is

99 Manuscript 83 in A. Khater and O. H. E. Burmester, eds., *Catalogue of the Coptic and Christian Arabic MSS. Preserved in the Library of the Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus, Known as Abū Sargah at Old Cairo*, vol. 3, Publications de la Société d'archéologie Copte (Cairo, 1977), 28.

100 Most recently Brakmann, building on Graf's analysis, regards the baptismal rite in manuscript Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Borgia Copt. 112 (1308 CE) (= VBC112), fols. 4r–27v, commissioned by Ibn Kabar as the earliest medieval record of Coptic initiation rites: Brakmann, "ΒΑΠΤΙΣΜΑ ΑΙΝΕΣΕΩΣ," 148; Graf, *GCAL*, 1:347–49. On this unedited manuscript, see A. Hebbelynck, "Inventaire sommaire des manuscrits coptes de la Bibliothèque Vaticane," in *Miscellanea Francesco Ehrle*, vol. 5, Studi e Testi 41 (Vatican City, 1924), 35–82, at 69.

101 صلاة تحليل تقال / صلاة تحليل تقال / 101 ορχην ἡμετερενρε εχεν οναχ παλλου / 101 على أم الطفل and continuing with its prayer text: φηνην ποσ φη πιπαντοκρατωρ πρεφθανιο ἡνιθεων φη εταφογαρχαζαρην ἡπεφθωκ μαϋςχς βεν πεφνομος. ... / الرب السيد الإله ضابط الكل خالق/ ... الدهور الذي أوصى عبده موسى في الناموس. ... ASL80, fols. 4r–6v. This prayer bears textual similarities to the non-Constantinopolitan supplication Εὐχὴ εἰς γυναῖκα μετὰ τὸ τεκεῖν αὐτῆς. Δέσποτα Κύριε . . . ὁ πάσαν φύσιν λογικὴν τε καὶ ἄλογον . . . ; see M. Arranz, “Preghiere parapenitenziali di purificazione e di liberazione nella tradizione bizantina” *OCP* 61 (1995): 425–94, at 444–47. While ASL80 is the only firmly dated manuscript that entirely omits a sex-dependent churching ritual, two notable undated codices follow the same pattern, retaining only the absolution prayer for the mother that is unassociated with a fixed purification length, which strongly suggests a broader prevalence of the tradition. First examined here, these manuscripts include Red Sea, Monastery of St. Paul, Ritual 184 (= MPR184), fols. 2r–3v, and Red Sea, Monastery of St. Paul, Ritual 196 (= MPR196), fols. 2r–4r.

102 NṢANKOYX₁ NEṢOOY / أَيَا مَا قَلَّائِل: ASL80, fol. 4v.

directly linked to the infant's baptism, the churching rite coincides with its administration. While an alternate hand has added some postbaptismal rituals to the manuscript, no prebaptismal rites, notes, or additions indicate a sex-dependent postpartum waiting period in this earliest extant witness to medieval Coptic baptismal practices.

The next oldest baptismal order is that of Ibn Kabar, who after serving as secretary to the Mamlūk prince of Egypt was ordained a priest in the patriarchal church known as al-Mu'allāqa (the Hanging Church) in Old Cairo, which is less than two hundred meters from the church of Sts. Sergius and Bacchus.¹⁰³ Referred to here as his "prayer book," this unedited composite manuscript, completed in 1308, comprises noneucharistic liturgical services commissioned by Ibn Kabar.¹⁰⁴ It stands out for its detailed, though differing, treatment of churching rites, offering invaluable insights on postpartum regulations from an authoritative liturgical figure who documented the practices of a prominent urban religious center.

Like ASL80, the baptismal liturgy in Ibn Kabar's prayer book begins with the same purification supplication, though titled slightly differently: "A prayer on the child's mother," lacking the designation of absolution.¹⁰⁵ In contrast to ASL80, however, Ibn Kabar's prayer book introduces a competing model for post-birth absolutions, at what was probably a watershed moment when statutory forty- and eighty-day purification rituals began to gain prominence and become more formally ritualized. In the same manuscript, approximately eighty folia after the completion of the baptismal rite, Ibn Kabar presents a second series of purification rituals that detail distinct and elaborate ceremonies for the mother based on the sex of her newborn.¹⁰⁶ He first provides the following rubric:

†ΜΕΤΡΗΘΕ ΝΤΕ
ΟΥΡΥΙΜΙ ΕΔΑΜΙCΙ
ΝΟΥΩΗΡΙ ΝΕΩΟΥΤ
ΗΕΝ ΠΧΩΚ ΝΜ
ΝΕΞΟΥ ΔΧΩ...¹⁰⁷

تحليل المرأة إذا ولدت
الابن الذكر في كمال
أربعين يوماً يقول ...

The absolution for a woman who bore a son at the completion of forty days, say ...

At this rite's completion, a concluding rubric given only in Arabic states: "After that, he [the celebrant] anoints them, her and the child, with oil, and she enters the church and receives the holy mysteries [Eucharist]" (ثم يدهنها هي والطفل بزيت وتدخل إلى البيعة وتتناول من السرائر المقدسة).¹⁰⁸ Immediately after this, a distinct purificatory rite is prescribed for the birth of a female infant, with the following rubric: "The absolution for a woman who bore a daughter at the completion of eighty days, say ..."¹⁰⁹

Within the liturgy of baptism, ordines with a similar dating to Ibn Kabar's also retain the general absolution unassociated with the lapse of time as well as the sex-based purification as an addition after the completion of the baptism, its associated post-baptismal rituals, and Communion prayers.¹¹⁰ As scholars of liturgical manuscripts have frequently shown, recent additions to rites are sometimes copied at the end of a service regardless of their appropriate place in the ritual unfolding.¹¹¹

107 VBC112, fol. 84v.

108 VBC112, fol. 85v.

109 †ΜΕΤΡΗΘΕ ΝΤΕ †ΟΥΡΥΙΜΙ ΕΔΑΜΙCΙ ΝΟΥΩΗΡΙ ΝΕΩΟΥΤ ΗΕΝ ΠΧΩΚ ΝΜ ΝΕΞΟΥ ΔΧΩ... / ... تحليل المرأة إذا ولدت البنت في كمال ثمانين يوماً يقال ... VBC112, fol. 86r.

110 For instance, the scribe of manuscript Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Copt. 72 (= PC72), fols. 2r–4v, 76r–79v, dated no earlier than the fourteenth century, adheres to this structure: manuscript 109 in L. Delaporte, "Catalogue sommaire des manuscrits coptes de la Bibliothèque Nationale," *ROC* 16 (1911): 85–99, 155–60, 239–48, 368–95, at 380. For the latest discussion on its date, see Brakmann, "ΒΑΠΤΙΣΜΑ ΑΙΝΕΣΕΩΣ," 148. A partial edition of this manuscript, based exclusively on the Coptic prayers and omitting the significant Arabic rubrics, has been published in V. Ermoni, "Rituel copte du baptême et du Mariage," *ROC* 5 (1900): 445–60; 6 (1901): 453–69; 7 (1902): 303–18; and 9 (1904) 526–36, at 5:447–48/455. Similarly following the pattern of PC72, yet from a later period, is the codex from the Church of St. Mary in Ḥārat al-Rūm (central Cairo): London, British Library, Or. 433 (1691 CE) (= BLOr433), fols. 2r–4r, 69r–77r; manuscript 842 in Crum, *Coptic Manuscripts in the British Museum*, 354.

111 Parenti has documented the practice of adding supplementary prayers outside the core formulary, typically as addenda in Byzantine

103 On Ibn Kabar, as well as the two other major liturgical authors, Ibn Sabbā' and Gabriel V (both discussed below), see the discussion and associated bibliography in R. [Arsenius] Mikhail, trans., *Guides to the Eucharist in Medieval Egypt: Three Arabic Commentaries on the Coptic Liturgy*, Christian Arabic Texts in Translation (New York, 2022), 1–19.

104 On VBC112, see above, n. 100.

105 ΟΥΡΥΙΜΙ ΕΔΑΜΙCΙ ΝΟΥΩΗΡΙ ΝΕΩΟΥΤ ΗΕΝ ΠΧΩΚ ΝΜ ΝΕΞΟΥ ΔΧΩ... / صلاة على أم الطفل: VBC112, fol. 4r.

106 These appended rites follow a series of five unrelated liturgical services for various occasions throughout the year.

Thus the inclusion of these texts at the very end likewise suggests that such sex-based absolutions—absent from the earliest Coptic baptismal ordo—are later customs developed and introduced as additions to an existing liturgical rite.

Some preliminary conclusions related to postnatal purifications can be drawn from comparing these earliest baptismal ordines. The absence of a postpartum churching ritual with a specific Levitically timed schedule in ASL80 indicates that such a custom was unknown and thus had not yet been developed and incorporated into the liturgical framework of the thirteenth century where this manuscript was in use. The duplication of two distinct absolution customs, separately documented in Ibn Kabar's prayer book and others, highlights a transitional period of liturgical development. In the absence of comprehensive studies on medieval Coptic initiation rites—and with only a few surviving manuscripts as our earliest witnesses—it appears that some time during the fourteenth century, scribes began documenting the sex-dependent, calendrical purification prayer, though it was not part of the baptismal rite proper. At the same time, they retained the older purification prayer, which was not connected to a calendrical purification, within the baptismal liturgy.¹¹² By about the sixteenth century, available extant manuscripts of baptismal rites reveal that the more recently introduced sex-specific absolution prayer had become more commonly accepted and integrated: scribes move the sex-specific absolution prayer to the beginning of the baptismal ordo as part of a newly formed, elaborate prebaptismal ritual, which is then followed by the older, universal purification prayer attested already in the oldest baptismal ordo as part of the baptism proper. This structure remains within the received Coptic tradition.¹¹³

liturgical texts: S. Parenti, "La preghiera della cattedra nell'eucologio Barberini gr. 336," *Bollettino della Badia greca di Grottaferrata*, 3rd ser., 8 (2011): 149–68, at 158–59.

112 The duplication of rituals among the Copts supports Baumstark's thesis that redactors typically retain older ritual layers, merely overshadowing them with added rites, which may be the scenario here: A. Baumstark, *Comparative Liturgy*, trans. F. Cross (London, 1957), 23–26.

113 'A. Ṣalīb, ed., *Kitāb al-ma'mūdiyya al-muqaddasa* (Cairo, 1896), 4–13 (boys after forty days), 14–17 (girls after eighty days). Apart from some slight textual variations, the unassociated general absolution prayer text and its placement in the ritual unfolding in ASL80, VBC112, and BLOr433 is identical to the received tradition: Ṣalīb, *Kitāb al-ma'mūdiyya*, 18–20. Some editions use only the general

Among his other writings, Ibn Kabar's magnum opus, *The Lamp of Darkness and the Elucidation of the Service*, cited here from the two earliest extant manuscripts, deals with a range of topics, with a pronounced focus on liturgical praxis as documented in the mid-fourteenth century.¹¹⁴ Several decades after the copying of his prayer book, in the earliest manuscripts of his *Lamp*, Ibn Kabar confirms that the absolution for the mother and child occurs at the church entrance, after fixed purification lengths with prescribed rites. Paraphrasing CHAR18 in reverse order, but without crediting the canon, Ibn Kabar emphasizes the mother's purification over that of the midwife:

والمرأة التي تلد فلتقم أربعين يومًا خارجًا عن الموضع المقدس إن كان ذكرًا وثمانين يومًا إن كان أنثى والقوايل لا ينلن من السرائر إلا بعد أن يطهرن أولًا كان ذكرًا فعشرون يومًا وإن كان أنثى فأربعون يومًا.¹¹⁵

The woman who gives birth remains forty days outside the holy place if she [bore a] male or eighty days if [a] female [child]. Midwives do not receive the mysteries [Eucharist] except after they are first purified; twenty days for a male and forty days for a female [child].

Ibn Kabar is the only author of his era to paraphrase CHAR18, but aside from the topic of midwives, its general perspectives on postpartum practices are corroborated by contemporary sources, which reveal nuanced differences in emphasis and occasionally in practice.

mother's absolution prayer: B. T. A. Evetts, ed., *The Rites of the Coptic Church: The Order of Baptism and the Order of Matrimony* (London, 1888), 17–19. For Catholic Copts—those following the Coptic liturgical rite but the pope of Rome and Catholic theology—the absolution of the mother theoretically still varies with the sex of the child: R. al-Ṭūkhī, *ⲛⲓⲧⲉ ⲛⲓⲧⲉⲣⲉⲙⲟⲩ ⲛⲓⲛⲓⲥⲧⲏⲣⲓⲟⲛ ⲉⲑⲟⲩⲁⲃ ⲛⲉⲙ ⲉⲁⲛ ⲁⲓⲛⲉⲛⲓ ⲛⲓⲧⲉ ⲛⲓⲣⲉⲣⲉⲙⲟⲩⲧ ⲛⲉⲙ ⲉⲁⲛ ⲁⲓⲛⲉⲛⲟⲥ ⲛⲉⲙ ⲛⲓⲕⲁⲧⲁⲛⲉⲣⲟⲥ ⲛⲁⲃⲟⲩ* (Rome, 1763), 1–7 (boys), 7–10 (girls).

114 Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ar. 203 (1360s CE) (= PAR203), and Uppsala, Uppsala University Library, O. Vet. 12 (1546 CE) (= UO12), copied from a base text dated to 1357. On these manuscripts, see, respectively, Troupeau, *Catalogue des manuscrits arabes*, 171–72; C. J. Tornberg, *Codices Arabici, Persici et Turcici Bibliothecae Regiae Universitatis Upsaliensis* (Uppsala, 1849), 306–9.

115 Only detailed in PAR203, fol. 228v. The scribe of UO12, fol. 207v, omits these details but instead refers the presider to the "baptismal book."

In the first half of the fourteenth century, Ibn Sabbāʿ, a contemporary of Ibn Kabar, composed his *Precious Jewel on the Church's Sciences*, which provides an explanation of church rituals often imbued with mystagogical insight. Various redactions of the *Jewel* exist, showing divergence across and even within the six manuscripts consulted.¹¹⁶ This text presents a diverse—and occasionally conflicting—range of views on postnatal ritual preparedness. Probably with a lay audience in mind, Ibn Sabbāʿ seeks to clarify the reasoning behind specific observances. Unlike his predecessors, he does not reproduce canons or ritual instructions; rather, he offers theoretical explanations for the rationale underlying these practices. Through this interpretative approach he attempts to justify, elucidate, and perhaps even persuade the faithful of these customs' significance. His theories reveal medieval concepts of perinatal ritual purity, underlying the framework that shaped these practices within his audience.

Ibn Sabbāʿ' s writings focus particularly on postpartum churching. He applies the ritual specifically to the newborn, leaving the mother's role as an implicit concern, much as did the Copts' earliest attestation of postnatal purification.¹¹⁷ In all six manuscripts, Ibn Sabbāʿ explicitly sets a fixed, sex-dependent period of forty or eighty days solely for the child.¹¹⁸ In chapter 30,

"On Baptism, Its Requirements and Rites," Ibn Sabbāʿ explains (without citing a source) that in ancient times baptism was delayed until the catechumen reached thirty years of age, in imitation of Christ's adult baptism. Out of concern for infants of the faithful dying without the sacrament, however, he advocates baptism in infancy and reiterates the observance of a forty- or eighty-day churching period for the child:¹¹⁹

الطفل الذكر المولود إذا طهر من دم النجاسة الخاصة
بنفاس والدته من بعد أربعين يوماً والأنثى يكون لها ذلك
بعد ثمانين يوماً.¹²⁰

The male child [is baptized] when pure from the blood of impurity concerning his mother's postpartum discharge, after forty days, and the female [child] after eighty days.

Ibn Sabbāʿ attributes infant impurity due to contact with lochia.¹²¹ He elaborates on this rationale in chapter 33, in his explanation of the Lord's Prayer. Reflecting on the phrase "forgive us our trespasses," Ibn Sabbāʿ argues that, since an infant cannot consciously commit transgressions, this state of sinfulness arises

116 Arranged by date of authorship, these include five unedited manuscripts: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ar. 207 (fourteenth century) (= PAR207); Scetis, Monastery of St. Macarius, Canon 1 (fifteenth century) (= MC1); Cairo, Coptic Museum, Liturgy 15 (1634 CE) (= CML15); Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ar. 208 (1638 CE) (= PAR208); and Scetis, Monastery of St. Macarius, Canon 12 (eighteenth century) (= MC12). Vincentio's 1966 edition is based on Cairo, Dār al-Kutub, Theology 221 (1750 CE) (= KT221); M. Vincentio, trans., *Pretiosa Margarita de Scientiis Ecclesiasticis*, Studia Orientalia Christiana, Aegyptiaca (Cairo, 1966). On these codices, see Troupeau, *Catalogue des manuscrits arabes*, 178–79 (PAR207 and PAR208); manuscript 262 in U. Zanetti, *Les manuscrits de Dair Abū Maqār: Inventaire*, Cahiers d'orientalisme XI (Geneva, 1986), 38 (MC1); supplement 30 in U. Zanetti, "Supplément à l'inventaire des manuscrits de Saint-Macaire," *BSAC* 45 (2006): 153–95, at 171 (MC12); manuscript 115 in Simaika and 'Abd al-Masih, *Coptic and Arabic Manuscripts*, 1:89 (CML15).

117 For parallels, consult the above examples in the *Life of Isaac*, the *Encomium on Theodore*, and above, n. 55.

118 In contemporary Coptic practice, infants may be baptized on any day after birth, though practically all parents wait until the mother's purification passes. Historically, however, a sex-dependent waiting period of either forty or eighty days was observed for the infant, rooted in beliefs regarding the mother's ritual impurity transmitted through breast milk, as documented by Vansleb: *Histoire*

de l'Église d'Alexandrie, 80–81, 107. See also its testament in ritual manuals: M. de Fenoyl, "Les sacrements de l'initiation chrétienne dans l'Eglise Copte," *PrOC* 7 (1957): 7–25, at 9. On contamination through breast milk, see n. 77 above. The medieval Ethiopian Orthodox Church, a community who commonly inherited and preserved Coptic praxis, also adhered to a sex-dependent rite of infant churching: Herman, "Women in Medieval Ethiopia," 368.

119 In antiquity, Christian families often delayed a child's baptism unless there was imminent danger: O. Bakke, *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis, 2005), 230–46. This practice continued into the Middle Ages in Egypt. Sixty years after Ibn Sabbāʿ' s presumed lifetime, Cyril III mandated that infant baptism must occur before the child's first birthday, with parents subject to reprimand and accountability if they delayed: PAR251, fol. 355v; Burmester "Canons of Cyril III," 89–90/112–13.

120 PAR207, fol. 58v; MC1, fol. 40v; CML15, fol. 35v; PAR208, fol. 40v; MC12, fol. 32v; KT221, fols. 33v–34v; Vincentio, *Pretiosa Margarita*, 78–79/432–33.

121 On these gynecological thoughts in ancient Egypt and Aristotle (and later Galen), see Audouit, "Women's Intimacy," 383–88; S. Connell, *Aristotle on Female Animals: A Study on the Generation of Animals*, Cambridge Classical Studies (Cambridge, 2016), 147–54; R. Hankinson, "Philosophy of Nature," in *The Cambridge Companion to Galen* (Cambridge, 2008), 218. Ibn Sabbāʿ' s framework mimics that of Origen, as detailed above.

instead from ritual impurity caused by contact with female reproductive fluids:

اعلم يا حبيب الطفل كان في بطن أمه يتقلب في ثلاثة معاني أحدها أنه كان في موضع ظلم قائم وثانيهما أنه نجس طمث وثالثها أنه ضيق حصر فأراد الله تعالى بخروجه إلى فسحة هذه الدار وضيائها وطهرها فنقله من الظلمة والظمة إلى النور البهي ومن النجاسة والطمث إلى الطهارة ومن الضيق والانحصار إلى الوسع والفضاء.¹²²

Know, O beloved, that the child was in his mother's womb tossing and turning in three ways. First, he was in an extremely dark place; second, *he was impure [due to contact with] menstrual [blood]*; and third, he was confined and restrained. So God the Almighty intended for him to emerge into the spaciousness, the light, and the purity of this abode and transferred him from darkness and gloom to the splendid light; *from impurity and menstrual [blood] to purity*; and from narrowness and confinement to breadth and space.

Unlike nearly all other Coptic authors, Ibn Sabbā' identifies only the neophyte as being in a state of ritual impurity, leaving the mother's postnatal purification unaddressed. Yet this focus still implies that since the child is considered impure due to contact with the mother's birth fluids, she too is probably also implicitly excluded. But he stops short of unequivocally designating the mother as impure or prescribing any specific maternal purification and exclusion from sacred space.

Internal contradictions, however, appear within the same manuscript of Ibn Sabbā's work. In a brief mention in chapter 111, "On the Patriarch's Meeting with Priests, Their Weekly Preaching, and Lay Manners," the scribe stipulates varying purification practices for infants, depending on the manuscript's redaction. The oldest of the six codices, the fourteenth-century manuscript PAR207, along with PAR208 both instruct that "parents should be urged to baptize their children after forty days."¹²³ Only in later versions of this chapter does

the scribe include a forty- or eighty-day waiting period, reflecting what was most likely a divergence in practice between a single forty-day period (as in the Byzantine Rite practiced also by Melkites in Egypt) and a forty- or eighty-day distinction based on the sex of the infant.¹²⁴

Not all medieval works that discuss access to the Eucharist and questions of ritual preparedness focus on female concerns. The late fourteenth-century *Treatise on the Eucharist*, attributed in its colophon to an anonymous monk from the Monastery of St. Anthony near the Red Sea, addresses male bodily emissions and abstention from the Eucharist, a topic not frequently developed in Coptic literature on impurity. This work excludes any discussion of women's blood impurity, which could simply be the result of the manuscript's reflecting practices unique to a male monastic community. But because the author does not limit himself to monastic concerns, and discusses the significance of sexual abstinence within marriage before receiving Communion and other ritual concerns for parochial contexts, the omission of any mention of women's impurity is conspicuous, especially for a work whose ritual and moral aim was to regulate frequency and access to the Eucharist.¹²⁵ While arguments from silence are never secure, it is evident that the author was aware of the concept of ritual purity as it applied to nonmonastic laity, but chose not to elaborate on women's blood impurities.

The work known as *The Spiritual Medicine* addresses various moral and ritual topics, but presents challenges regarding authorship and dating. Though it is often attributed to Mikhā'il, who served as bishop of Atrīb and Milīj in Egypt's Delta region and died in the late thirteenth century, this attribution relies on early modern manuscript sources. Scholarly consensus has leaned toward treating the work as anonymous, with no clear agreement on its date, but with a fourteenth-century terminus ante quem.¹²⁶

The author's discussions on post-birth ritual purity appear in chapters 10, "On Marital Relations," and 27, "On Baptism." Advising husbands on the times they

122 PAR207, fol. 67r-v; MC1, fol. 52r-v; CML15, fol. 48r; PAR208, fols. 53v-54r; MC12, fol. 41r-v; KT221, fol. 44v; Vincentio, *Pretiosa Margarita*, 106/448. Emphasis in translation added.

123 PAR207, fol. 207v, and PAR208, fol. 135r.

124 MC1, fol. 268r, and Mistrīḥ's edition, which is dependent on KT221, fol. 113r-v; Vincentio, *Pretiosa Margarita*, 378/590. CML15 lacks the phrase entirely, while MC12 has a lacuna.

125 VAR123, fols. 11v-15r; 'Abdallah, "Un trattato inedito," 373-79/426-35.

126 See the most expansive study on this work in A. al-Maqārī, *Fihris kitābāt ābā' kanīsat al-Iskandariyya (al-kitābāt al-'arabiyya)*, 2 vols. (Cairo, 2012), 1:604-19.

must refrain from conjugal relations, the author discusses maternal impurity, where he also gives important testimony to the practice of male circumcision among the Copts of late medieval Egypt.¹²⁷ He stipulates:

إن المرأة إذا ولدت غلامًا تكون طامئًا سبعة أيام ثم تختن ولدها وتبقى بعده ثلاثة وثلاثين يومًا على الدم الثاني ولا يدنو إليها شيء طاهر ولا تدخل إلى مقدس الله إلى أن تكمل تطهيرها وإن ولدت أنثى فتكون طامئًا أربعة عشر يومًا بحيضها وتجلس ستة وستين يومًا على الدم الباقي فإذا كمل تطهيرها بغلام أو بجارية فلتقرب القربان وأما الشريعة الحديثة فإن الآباء يقولون في المحارم والله على جميع النساء المؤمنات النصرانيات الامتناع عن دخول الكنيسة وهن حائضات وعليهن الامتناع عن أخذ القربان وهن في علة الطمث حتى تنتقضي عدة أيامهن.¹²⁸

If a woman gives birth to a boy, she is considered impure for seven days, after which she circumcises her son, and remains impure for an additional thirty-three days with the second blood. During this time, nothing pure should come near her, and she should not enter the sanctuary of God until her purification is complete. If she gives birth to a girl, she is impure for fourteen days during her bleeding and continues for sixty-six days on the remaining blood. Once her purification is complete, whether for a boy or a girl, she may then receive Communion. As for the new law, the fathers say regarding forbidden matters and God: all believing Christian women should refrain from entering the church while menstruating, and they should also abstain from receiving Communion while in the state of menses until the completion of their days.

127 Coptic literature both preceding and following *The Spiritual Medicine* permits male circumcision at the family's discretion, provided it occurs before baptism. For example, Canon 19 of Cyril II (r. 1078–1092) in PAR251, fol. 345v; O. H. E. Burmester, ed., "Canons of Cyril II, LXVII Patriarch of Alexandria," *Le Muséon* 49 (1936): 245–88, at 270/284. See also Gabriel V, who encourages circumcision before baptism, in PAR98, fol. 127v; 'Abdallah, *L'ordinamento*, 129/331.

128 Anbā Šamū'il, ed., *al-Ṭibb al-rūḥānī: Qawānīn mukhtaṣara mim mā rattabahu al-ābā'* (Cairo, 1979), 50–51. Emphasis in translation added. Shortly thereafter, the text continues with the author advising that women should abstain from attending church and receiving Communion until her bleeding completely ceases, even if it lasts longer than usual.

The text explicitly promotes strict adherence to the postnatal purification paradigm outlined in Leviticus 12, with a bipartite division between an initial and a later period of purification and while considering the woman in a state of impurity for the entire forty or eighty days.¹²⁹ Other accounts (except for Origen), in contrast, describe a solid forty- or eighty-day regulation, without distinguishing the initial days. Elsewhere, the author confirms that infants too were expected to follow a full forty- or eighty-day cycle of purification.¹³⁰

Rounding off our discussion of late medieval Coptic evidence is the work known as *The Ritual Order*, which was officially sanctioned and spearheaded by Pope Gabriel V in 1411, as an initiative aimed to further standardize rituals among the Copts. Yet this authoritative compilation of composite rituals crafted from an array of sources, intended to represent "official liturgy," does not specify a purification length.

Gabriel V provides guidelines to clergy on baptisms, clarifying that ritual impurity affects only the mother and not the child, in direct contradiction to Ibn Sabbā, though he does not specify the duration of the mother's liminal status. He emphasizes that a child may be baptized at any time, and not solely in emergencies, implying that the newborn is considered ritually pure from birth. Gabriel V advises clergy:

إن أحضروا إليكم طفلًا يقصدوا عماده قبل طهر أمه فعمده عاجلاً ولو أنه ابن يومه وأمرهم أن لا ترضعه أمه يا إمام لكن المرضعة ترضعه ثلاثة [أيام] وإن لم توجد من ترضعه ثلاثة أيام فقتل زناره آخر نهاده وترضعه أمه دخول الليل وليس عليها لوم لأجل الضرورة شيء من الآثام.¹³¹

129 The author of *The Spiritual Medicine* asserts that the entire duration of the purification renders the mother as impure, in contrast to Origen, who deems new mothers to be in a state of "unclean blood" only during the initial seven or fourteen days. See n. 20 and the associated discussion above.

130 The author states, "If a male child dies before reaching forty days, or a female child before reaching eighty days, without any illness or showing any signs of weakness or other apparent causes, then they [the parents] are excused from accountability. In such a case, the parents are not legally obliged by any canon for the child's death without baptism." For the original text, see Šamū'il, *al-Ṭibb al-rūḥānī*, 101.

131 PAR98, fol. 127r–v; 'Abdallah, *L'ordinamento*, 129/331–2. Emphasis in translation added. Gabriel also teaches about a post-marriage absolution prayer for the bride, most likely related to blood impurities, though he does not elaborate on the associated rituals. This rite survives in manuscript Cairo, Coptic Museum, 331 (1374 CE), fols.

If they bring you a child they intend to baptize *before the purification of his mother, baptize him immediately even if he were only a day old*; and command them, O leader, not to nurse him from his mother, but from a wet nurse for three [days]. If no one can be found to nurse him for three days, remove his girdle¹³² at the end of the day, and let his mother nurse him at the beginning of the night, and there is no blame nor sin upon her due to the necessity.

Without providing a specific reason, Gabriel V—unlike the nomocanons governing emergency baptisms—allows an infant to be baptized at any time, even on the day of birth. He specifies that this may occur before the mother's purification, without imposing a fixed postnatal period. But in making this claim, he also reaffirms the perceived impurity of the new mother and highlights the transmissibility of her impurity to the infant.¹³³

Conclusion

The belief that a woman's vaginal blood flow rendered her incompatible with sacred space is rooted in a broad pan-Mediterranean perception of reproductive blood as defiling and impure, where such women were "separated" from society. These religious and societal concepts were adopted across several ancient Christian liturgical rites, persisted well into the Middle Ages, and for some remain in modernity.¹³⁴ Yet the study of women and blood

impurities in Christian Egypt reveals an evolving tradition that goes beyond a simple appropriation of Leviticus or even non-Christian customs. The diverse range of sources examined here—hagiographies, *Encomium*, homilies, ecclesiastical legislation, ritual manuals, baptismal ordines, and liturgical commentaries—from the second through the fifteenth century reveals a complex interplay of cultural, inter- as well as intrareligious influences, and historical contributions that continually shaped and redefined the practices and beliefs surrounding the purification of perinatal women and their infants. Table 2 succinctly highlights the major findings in chronological order, followed by concluding observations.

The plethora of data indicates an increasing stringency over time regarding female blood impurities and those who come into contact with them. This trend, however, is marked by resistance and significant inconsistencies, particularly concerning the definition of when a woman is considered purified from vaginal blood discharge, and thus welcomed again to full liturgical participation. Understanding the emphasis on menstrual separation provides a basis for the contrast with literature on postpartum regulations. Late antique Egyptian sources understood menstruating women as in social isolation, and thus incompatible with either entering sacred spaces or receiving Communion, a tradition also deeply rooted within late antique and early medieval West Syriac authors, contrary to what has been previously assumed. Similarly, authors concerned with this matter in the Middle Ages upheld the tradition of menstrual separation from the church and even imposed consequences for those who did not observe or enforce it. At the same time, these writers, aside from some redactions of the *Guide to the Beginners*, are unanimous that the cessation of blood discharge was the condition for a woman's return to ecclesiastical participation. In this understanding, they do not follow the purification schedule of Leviticus 15, thus distinguishing themselves from Egyptian Jews, all the while adhering to the same general understanding of vaginal blood as ritually defiling. The fact that menstrual concerns are continually reiterated in novel canons and newly written works

3v–4v; manuscript 144 in M. Simaika and Y. 'Abd al-Masih, *Coptic and Arabic Manuscripts*, 1:73–74.

132 The *zunnār* (ζωνάριον) is a red ribbon wrapped around the neophyte's body after baptism and conventionally (though not in current practice) removed on the eighth day after initiation: O. H. E. Burmester, "The Baptismal Rite of the Coptic Church (A Critical Study)," *BSAC* 11 (1945): 27–86, at 80–82. The significance of the three-day period remains unclear, but it seems intended to allow for a gradual reduction in postpartum discharge—a crucial marker of purification, particularly in the "first" discharge phase, as evident in various earlier discussions.

133 See above, nn. 77 and 118.

134 In 2017 the Holy Synod, the governing body of the Coptic Orthodox Church, issued in Arabic new "Decisions and Recommendations" on Communion reception during reproductive bodily emissions for both males and females. In summary, it stated that (1) humanity is not devoid of the Holy Spirit, and even during natural bodily emissions one remains holy, (2) out of respect to what we have received from tradition, and out of piety and fitting care, those who

are not bodily prepared [i.e., ritually prepared] should refrain from receiving the Eucharist, though they are still allowed to practice other spiritual exercises, and (3) there is room for "exceptional cases" to commune with permission from the spiritual father for pastoral reasons: Coptic Orthodox Church, "Qarārāt wa-ṭawṣīyyāt jalsat al-majma' al-muqaddas dawrat yūnyū 2017," <https://tinyurl.com/2p9c8rh4>.

Table 2. Major Findings on Female Blood Impurities, in Diachronic Order

	Circumstance				
	Menstruating women	Mother's postpartum abstinence	Impurity via contact	Churching rite	Infant's pollution
Origen (3rd c.)	Considered impure for 7 days.	Cites impurity as lasting 7 or 14 days of "unclean blood" and 33 or 66 days of "clean blood" depending on the sex of the infant.	Possibly.	Implied, at least for infants.	Yes.
Alexandrian Patriarchs (3rd–4th c.)	Dionysius: Should not enter sacred space or commune until pure. Timothy: No Communion reception until purified.				
Church Orders (3rd–4th c.)	The <i>AT</i> advises not to baptize them until purified. Both the <i>DA</i> and the <i>AC</i> speak against menstrual separation.	The <i>AC</i> states not to observe post-birth purifications.			
Syriac Fathers (5th–8th c.)	John of Tella, Severus of Antioch, and Jacob of Edessa all maintain menstrual separation.	Jacob of Edessa: Until the cessation of afterbirth blood flow.	No, especially for Jacob of Edessa.		Unlikely, especially for Jacob of Edessa.
Vitae/Homilies (8th–10th c.)	Per Leviticus 15 in <i>On Archangel Michael</i> .	According to Leviticus 12's schedule of 40/80 days in <i>On Archangel Michael</i> .	Per Leviticus 15 in <i>On Archangel Michael</i> .		Of undefined length in Isaac's Vita and Theodore's <i>Encomium</i> .
Ibn Nānā (11th c.)	No Eucharist until purified. Church attendance is ambiguous.	Opposes the Levitical 40/80 day purification. Empowers mothers to return to church and partake of the Eucharist when postpartum discharge ends.		Yes, including washing, absolution.	Possibly.
CHAR18 (12th c.)		Follows a sex-dependent 40/80 days of purification for the mother and half that for midwives.	Yes, especially for midwives.		Probably.
Nomocanons (12th–13th c.) ¹	Barred from church and Communion reception until purified.	Fully adopts CHAR18, though not without incongruity. Mikhā'il contradicts Communion reception frequency in another issued canon.	Yes.		Yes, until the fortieth day, which contradicts their other literature.
Cyril III (13th c.)	Cannot enter church, therefore no Communion reception.	Sex specific, postnatal purification of unspecified duration.	Anyone in contact with the mother.		Possibly, given concerns for impurity via contact.

1 These include the nomocanons of Gabriel II, Mikhā'il of Dūmyār, and al-Šafi.

	Circumstance				
	Menstruating women	Mother's postpartum abstinence	Impurity via contact	Churching rite	Infant's pollution
<i>Guide to the Beginners</i> (13th c.)	Yes, even gives varying purifications.	VA117 does not stipulate a period. BC9 follows a 40/80 day regulation according to the sex of the infant.	Probably based on BC9.	VA117 and BC9 absolved external to the church.	Only in BC9.
Baptismal ordines (13th–14th, 17th c.)		ASL80, MPR184, and MPR196: only of unspecified duration. VBC112, PC72, and BLOr433: also include a sex-dependent 40/80 day purification as an addendum.		Not in ASL80, MPR184, or MPR196. VBC112, PC72, and BLOr433, yes, with added elaborate rituals.	
<i>Order of the Priesthood</i> (13th c.)		Implied for 40 days?			Yes, likely for 40 days.
Ibn Kabar (14th c.)		VBC112, with and without a defined waiting period. <i>Lamp</i> , according to CHAr18.	Yes in the <i>Lamp</i> , based on CHAr18.	All sources give the full rite occurring outside the church.	Inferred from all sources.
Ibn Sabbā' (14th c.)		Not defined, though possibly inferred from all redactions based on the infant's impurity.	Possibly.		In all redactions, distinctly emphasizes infant's pollution, though in varying lengths.
<i>The Spiritual Medicine</i> (14th c.)	Yes, for the term of her bleeding.	Yes, as prescribed in Leviticus 12's initial and later purifications, and considers all 40/80 days as impure (contrast with Origen).	Yes.		Yes, for 40/80 days.
Gabriel V (15th c.)	Not to be baptized until purified.	Inferred, but for an unspecified duration.	Probable.	Yes, occurring outside of sacred space.	Unlikely, as newborns can be baptized at any time.

on liturgical praxis across the long Middle Ages underscores the expectation that women conform to this tradition, while also suggesting that adherence to it may have been lax, paralleling a decline in ritual purity observance among medieval Jews and Muslims in Egypt.¹³⁵

Regarding postpartum purification, scholars have long argued that from late antiquity, Egyptian

Christians adhered to and even introduced the application of Levitical purity regulations. The evidence from early Christian Egypt, however, does not attest to any widespread mandate of ritual purity for postpartum women, even though such customs flourished among late antique Jews and pagans. Whether the lack of emphasis on postpartum impurity indicates the absence of such notions is difficult to affirm, especially since vaginal bleeding in the context of menstruation

135 See above, nn. 60 and 61.

was frequently upheld as barring a woman from liturgical participation. At most, however, it appears that the bleeding of the perinatal period would have been the primary concern, in keeping with early Christian Egyptian affirmations regarding menstruation, as implied by Origen. The inclusion of a sex-specific, calendrical post-birth purification for midwives and new mothers in CHAr18 can only be confirmed in late medieval evidence. Thus aside from the ambiguity in Origen, no late antique evidence survives to suggest that Egyptian Christians imposed a Levitical system of barring postpartum women from the liturgical assembly for forty or eighty days depending on the sex of the infant.

In contrast to the absence of postpartum women from the purity regulations of early Christian Egypt, a flowering of discussions of postnatal purification developed in the Middle Ages, paralleling the development of ritual impurity observances and liturgical practices in Byzantine and broader eastern Christian religious customs. The earliest Coptic testimony to postpartum purification emphasizes the newborn as ritually unprepared for an unspecified period, rather than focusing on the mother. Although the mother's defilement could be inferred in this context due to the infant's ritual status, explicit attestations of the mother's impurity emerge only toward the end of the first millennium. Even so, the earliest baptismal ritual manual first examined and introduced here does not include a churching rite dependent on the sex of the newborn. Eventually, a Levitical system adapted to the liturgical practices of Coptic Christianity was more widely adopted, especially around the fourteenth century. Some medieval Coptic leaders were reluctant toward such a strict adoption of Levitical precepts, either preferring women to return to church with the cessation of bleeding, as did the West Syrians, retaining churching rituals without a defined purification or following a forty-day period regardless of the sex of the infant, as analogous to Byzantine customs practiced by Egypt's Melkites. Despite the various traditions on postpartum purification among the Copts, it was the application of a Levitical purity system, seemingly taking precedence around the fourteenth century, that came to hold the widest currency and has continued to characterize the mainstream Coptic practice in modern times.

As Catherine Bell and other ritual theorists have frequently argued, ritual and its regulation enable individuals and a society to embody hierarchies, actively

shaping and reinforcing their identities within a structured framework.¹³⁶ While gender hierarchies are clearly reinforced in such purity regulations, our deeper dive into the sources has revealed a nuanced history in which adherence to postpartum purity appears to have fluctuated over time. Moreover, in choosing to adopt a stricter application of Levitical law regarding postpartum purification in the Middle Ages, other hierarchies are also asserted. Medieval Coptic history reflects a distinct inclination to assert its supremacy over the Melkite Church and its Byzantine liturgical traditions, with late medieval Coptic scholars frequently participating in intellectual debates and critiquing the perceived flaws in Melkite practices.¹³⁷ Adopting a strict adherence to notions of Leviticus 12 served to distinguish them from and to assert their superiority to the Melkites by demonstrating fidelity to Scripture.¹³⁸ This is underscored by the fact that the redactors of the anonymously authored *Guide to the Beginners* and Ibn Sabbā's *Jewel* framed their advocacy for a Levitical purification system as a "correction" to the forty-day period observed by Byzantines. In this light, one might argue that discussions of postpartum purification were not always only or even primarily about women and their identity. Rather, ritual practices around women's reproductive biology became a tool for church authorities to project a notion of supremacy of Coptic over Byzantine practices.

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136 See especially C. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford, 2009), chapter 9.

137 As a few examples, Mikhā'il of Dūmyāt, who engaged in long debates with the Melkites, used biblical arguments to assert that Copts were adherents of scripture. See PA251, fols. 339v, 341r; Burmester, "Sayings of Michael," 108–9, 114–15/118–19, 125–26. Mikhā'il is not alone: CPT236, fols. 157r–162r; Assfalg, *Die Ordnung*, 50–60/127–36.

138 My concluding thesis is not an isolated instance. M. S. A. Mikhail presents a comparable case regarding the observance of a Lenten fast immediately following the Feast of Epiphany, aligning with the biblical record: "The Evolution of Lent in Alexandria and the Alleged Reforms of Patriarch Demetrius," in *Copts in Context: Negotiating Identity, Tradition, and Modernity*, ed. N. van Doorn-Harder (Columbia, SC, 2017), 169–80, 252–58, at 177–78.

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